

ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY

M A G A Z I N E

JULY/AUGUST 1997

Double Issue

Alligators Don't Ask for Payment

Stephen Wasylyk

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Janice Law

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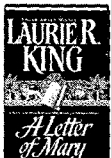
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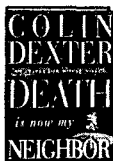
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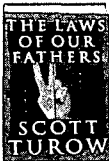
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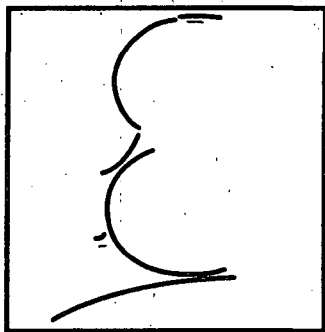


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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

This is a very tough one. Often in this space we introduce authors new to AHMM, authors whose first stories for us will, we hope, be the start of a long and happy career joining author, magazine, and readers.

Sometimes that works out, sometimes spectacularly.

It certainly did so in the case of Stephen Wasylyk, whose first story (and first attempt at a mystery) appeared in AHMM in April 1968. For nearly three decades Mr. Wasylyk continued sending his always entertaining, absorbing, thoughtful stories in our direction; the one in this issue is his one hundred thirty-ninth. He began to write for EQMM in 1977, publishing fourteen there to date.

Both of us have a few more stories in inventory, to be pub-

lished over the coming months.

Unfailingly courteous, generous, kind, and professional, Mr. Wasylyk was a delight to work with, though "work with" hardly applies when an author is so virtually word perfect. Very few changes were required in his stories; they arrived polished and gleaming.

"For Loyal Service" (8/89) and "The Alley" (11/88) were nominated for Edgars.

He was married (his wife died a few years ago) and had a son.

When he retired in 1988, Mr. Wasylyk was creative director for advertising for Morrison Press in Philadelphia. Born December 10, 1922, he was a fighter pilot in World War II, and a major at war's end. One of his avocations—no surprise to his readers—was woodworking.

He died on October 30, 1996.

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Streetwise

J. A. Paul

Carlo opened the door a crack, just enough to listen to the noises on the street. He heard scratching in the garbage bin, a squeal of brakes, a few blocks away the song of an ambulance. No hushed voices, no footsteps. Either would have kept him in hiding until he was late for school.

Odds in his favor, he looked outside. The street, a dim canyon between towers of sooty brick, showed no sign of Georgie or the two friends who ran with him. Carlo adjusted his backpack and started up the block. His tennis shoes, one laced with braided string, fell softly on the pavement. At crevices or doorways deep enough to conceal three, he paused to listen. A second or two's headstart was all he needed to outrun his tormentors, but the advantage came from staying alert. Twenty paces before the intersection, he left the sidewalk and went streetside of the parked cars. In a crouch at wheel level he crept to the first in line and peered over its hood. They weren't on the avenue either.

According to the clock in the flower shop, it was almost ten to nine. Plenty of time if he hurried. Carlo speeded up, glad it was Monday. Mondays the blackboard was really black, chalkmarks sharp to his seat at the back of the room. Mondays the cafeteria didn't smell like burned cooking oil, the boys' room was swept of butts and crumpled toilet paper. If he could pick only one day a week to go in early, he'd pick Mondays. Before the bell rang, he'd pull down the wall map, find the mark that was New York. Ms. Haywood only used the map for pointing to trouble spots across the world, or to show them old war zones. If he could circle New York, a starting point, maybe the map would stop looking like tangled yarn.

But being early was wishful thinking, like wishing for his own back yard. He learned that lesson when he was new in the neighborhood, when he didn't know leaving early would introduce him to Sammy Shoes, so named for his habit of holding guys down and pulling off footwear in search of hidden

money. The clash cost Carlo two quarters and taught him the school was locked till a quarter of nine, anyway. And he found out he was lucky that Free Ride hadn't surfaced that day, a big guy who shoved kids against the fence, made them breathe in dust they didn't want. Now he knew the safest thing was to start late, take his chances with Georgie. Carlo heard a yell.

"Hey, look who's here!"

Georgie and the others were five yards behind him and closing. Too late to see where they'd been hiding; that's what he got for letting his mind wander. Stupid. Carlo circled his thumbs on the straps of his backpack and ran.

Horns blared, a bus slammed its brakes, but he got across the avenue, made the turn on the next street before they could cross behind him. A scan of the nearest stores confirmed what he already knew—they were still closed. The old lady he'd seen before sat in her usual place at an open window above the card store, but that store didn't open until ten. A muscular man wearing a brown leather jacket was across the street walking toward him, probably coming from the Chinese laundry. The laundry opened early but was too many stores away to be of any use. The alley was tempting, but if

they showed up before he made it over the fence, he'd only reveal his best shortcut.

He measured the cars at the curb. A gray Taurus looked right. Not as high off the pavement as a van, not as low as a sports car. Pounding footfalls neared the corner behind him. Carlo flung his backpack under the chosen car and dived after it.

Three pairs of feet stopped two yards away.

"Where'd he go?" one asked loudly.

They might've been asking the guy in the brown jacket, who by this time had to be close, but Carlo didn't hear him answer. All he heard was the ring of a phone and the old lady's window closing. Seconds later a pair of brown Dockers walked between the hightops of Georgie and them.

"He's prob'ly in a store," came Georgie's voice.

Carlo stayed stone-still. From under a car he could kick, use a jacketed arm or his schoolbag to deflect pipes or knives, tricks he'd learned in his last neighborhood. But his secret way of disappearing would no longer work if they found him.

"Man, I want that ticket!"

If his lunch ticket was all they wanted, Carlo would've handed it over. But he had before and got punched anyway.

"Let's look around. Little crap's prob'ly behind a door."

"Nah, it'll take all day," said Georgie.

"But I want . . ."

"I said it'll take too long. Let's go."

They crossed the street. At the tavern on the corner they made a right turn toward school.

Carlo crawled out. The guy in the leather jacket was up on the avenue, probably waiting for a bus. For a second it looked like he was watching the trouble-makers, that he turned and gave Carlo a quick nod, but Carlo figured he only imagined it. He brushed himself off, wishing his jacket was any color but its conspicuous red. He could ask his mother to dye it, but she'd given it to him for his birthday. The request might hurt her feelings.

It had to be late. Time for his shortcut.

He trotted to the alley between the card store and the camera shop. A bearded wino was sitting on the ground with his knees drawn up, head on his arms. He squinted up at Carlo's approach; then his head fell down again. Behind the guy on both sides of the alley were loose piles of newspaper. Under each was evidence of a human—a grimy cap, torn gloves, dirty fingernails poking out of ragged cuffs.

Carlo started his sprint. When one of the paper blankets crackled, he ran faster. Sometimes they threw bottles when he woke them. Mostly they smashed on the cement, but an ugly bruise on the back of his leg proved that once in awhile even a wino hit a moving target. He reached top speed at the halfway point, propelling him up the chain link fence at the end. On the other side, in the litter-strewn yard of the luncheonette that faced the school, he relaxed. The man who ran the place was okay. He'd seen Carlo come over before, and he hadn't yelled.

A scouting party of flies rose from the putrid depths of a dumpster to buzz his face. Carlo brushed them away and entered the passage to the street. He picked his way between rusty cans and broken glass. A careless step could send them spinning; he might as well use a bullhorn to announce himself to anyone lying in wait. At the end he looked across at the school. Nobody was there.

Georgie's hoots sounded when Carlo was on the school steps. The threesome was just turning the avenue at the end of the block. He'd beaten them with room to spare. He was on the inside stairwell taking the steps two at a time when the last bell

rang. Seconds later Carlo opened his classroom door.

Ms. Haywood made the face with the twisted mouth, the one that brought that funny heat in his neck that rose straight to his hair. But she didn't say anything this time, probably because he wasn't very late, so by the time he got to the closet Carlo felt okay. Now all he had to do was get his jacket at a minute to three, and be first at the door. When the bell rang he'd be down the hall, down the stairs, maybe even outside running, before a single enemy got out of his seat.

The next morning homicide detective Nate Calhoun sat at his desk in a room at the back of the precinct. He was briefing his partner Ben Sherman about the latest murder. Sherman had just returned from vacation, having taken Monday off, too.

"Third one in the same vicinity in the last eight weeks. As usual, no unaccounted prints," Nate said.

Ben nodded and continued to eat a chocolate doughnut.

Nate turned some papers. "Same M.O. The time frame is tight this time, though. Should help. Son called the victim at five minutes to nine. A UPS deliveryman found the body in the vestibule at nine fifteen."

"Same type head wounds?" Ben asked.

"Yes. M.E. says it's the same half-inch drive breaker bar. Perp got careless. Left hair that belonged to the second victim on the head of this one."

"Got away with it twice, that's why," said Ben. "Third time he thinks he's a genius."

Nate leafed through the reports. "Same as the others. Contents of her purse found on the floor, everything but cash, which her son and a neighbor agree was probably twenty or thirty dollars, what she usually carried for groceries on Mondays. It was about the only time she ever went out."

Ben got up and went to Nate's desk. He picked up a sheet and read through it.

"Looks like her neighbor can count herself lucky," he said.

Nate agreed. Two apartments were above the card store, each rented by a widow. Usually the women shopped together. This time the neighbor's granddaughter had visited on Saturday, bringing groceries along, so the neighbor didn't need to go with her friend on Monday.

"Or maybe he wouldn't have hit two," said Ben.

"I think he would've," Nate said. "A couple of women in their seventies don't put up much resistance. If he knew

their routine, he might've expected twice the cash."

"Door to the street wasn't locked?"

"Nope—same as the other scenes," Nate replied. "Mailboxes, apartment bells, intercom—all in the vestibule. Landlord doesn't lock the outside door till nine P.M. They think it's safe because the inside wall is half glass. They can see a loiterer in the vestibule before they open the hall door."

"Which means she didn't see anybody suspicious, which means that yet again the rat propped open the street door, not so much that she'd notice, but enough to hear the inside door open. He got to her while she was trapped between the two doors."

"The prop was a nail again, same size. We have it."

Ben went back to his seat, leaving the reports on Nate's desk. He rarely read all of them when he could be filled in verbally. "When is the mail delivered over there?" he asked.

"About noon. The Chinese laundry opens at eight, the other stores at nine thirty and ten. Sheer chance the UPS guy showed up. Birthday present for the other woman."

"Delivery guy clean?"

"As a whistle. Sick over what he saw. And not in the picture on the other two killings."

Nate's hand was resting on some folders. Ben eyed them.

"So who you got?" he asked.

"Reports are written to be read," Nate chided. "Your vacation ended last night, remember?"

"Right, so who you got?"

"Three kids. Georgie Leach, Lyle Stokes, Duane Crib. But it's tight. Owner of the bar on the corner saw them 'a little before the nine o'clock news' when they turned off that street and walked past his place. That would be toward school. They were easy enough to find. The school office had the three of them come in for a late pass about ten or twelve minutes past."

"Could be kids," said Ben. "Know the neighborhood, the residents. Quick hit for small cash. Are they on hold?"

"No. There's not enough. The woman was on the phone with her son until nine o'clock."

"So? How far away is the school?"

"Three or four minutes." Nate held up his hand when he saw Ben about to argue. "I know. They could've doubled back when the barman wasn't looking. But why would they? If they had robbery in mind, they would've stayed till it was done."

"Kids might do anything. Halfway down the block they

get the idea and turn around. Kids don't ring a bell on the other two, though."

"No," Nate agreed.

"But," Ben continued, "we don't have good time frames on the last two, so we can't know they weren't there. All the killings were in the same general neighborhood."

"I know," said Nate. "And none of the kids live on that block, and they won't say what they were doing there, except 'taking a walk.' But if they went straight to school, they should've been five minutes late at most, not twelve."

"So now you're arguing my side," said Ben. "What did they say about that?"

"That they stayed outside to have a smoke."

"Anybody see them?"

"No."

"Other statements?" Ben asked.

"Some winos say a kid ran through their alley, but they were half asleep so they can't identify him except for a red jacket he wore. And they don't know what time it was. And a statement from a Mr. Wing who owns the Chinese laundry farther down the block. Says one of his customers might've seen something. The guy dropped off his laundry about nine, maybe earlier." Nate opened his note-

book. "Got his address from a receipt. Ready to go?"

"What about the winos?" Ben asked as Nate maneuvered through the morning traffic.

"The ones the boys got couldn't stand up. Doesn't mean they couldn't earlier, or that it wasn't an act, but none had any priors except for loitering. They were relieved of sticks and a few mean shards of glass, but no breaker bar. Of course, if it was one of them, he wouldn't hang around to be questioned. I hope it wasn't. It'll be like looking for a streetlight."

"If they're right about a kid running past, that could be our perp," said Ben.

"Yeah, if we knew what time it was. They said he went over a fence into the back yard of a luncheonette, but the statement from the restaurant owner says he didn't see anything unusual. We'll talk to him ourselves after we talk to this guy."

Nate pulled to the curb next to a fire hydrant. They found their street number on the storefront of a school for jujitsu.

"This one wouldn't need a breaker bar," Ben observed.

Inside they found a well-built military type in his early thirties working out with barbells. He was in a large room, just off a huge exercise mat. No one else was there. He sat up when they entered, gave them the once-

over. His eyes glanced off Nate's slim frame, stopped at Ben's paunch as if estimating the time required to get him into shape before lessons in a martial art would be of any benefit. He came forward.

"Help you?" he asked.

"Business slow?" asked Ben.

"No, matter of fact it's good. Lessons start at ten."

"We're looking for Dave Corcoran," said Nate.

"That's me. What can I do for you?"

They introduced themselves, told them where they'd obtained his name, explained the reason for the visit. Corcoran showed them through a door behind the counter. It opened into a small office. He sat behind a gray table doubling as a desk. Ben and Nate took a two-seater vinyl couch across from him.

"I heard about it on the news," said Corcoran. "They didn't say what time it happened, though. You say around nine?"

"A bit later. Did you see anybody on the street?"

Corcoran hesitated. His eyes slid away.

"Can't say to the minute, but I guess I was there about five to nine. I like to open up at nine sharp, if I can. Do some book-keeping, work out. Allows an hour before classes start."

The evasion told them Corcoran had seen something but

wanted to consider it before sharing it.

"Who'd you see on the street?"

Ben asked impatiently.

Corcoran sat back in his chair.

"Four boys," he answered finally. "Three hoods and a kid running from them."

He described Leach, Stokes, and Crib to perfection, then admitted unhappily that he had watched them almost until they got to the block that ran to the school.

"And the fourth, did you see where he went?" Nate asked.

"Saw him cross the street. Looked like he went into an alley."

"But you're not sure?"

"No. When I knew he was safe, I watched the other three."

"When you knew he was safe?" Ben repeated. "You mean you hung on the corner to make sure?"

"I don't like three to one odds. Especially when the three are all a head taller."

"Tell us about this kid," said Nate.

Corcoran smiled, which softened his marine-honed features considerably.

"Streetwise pup. Rolled under a car to hide. Best place, really. A car will do seventy-five percent of your blocking for you. Smart. Most people never think of that. I tell my students ..."

"I meant what did he look like?" Nate put in.

"I didn't see him up close like the others."

"As much as you remember."

The smile had disappeared. It was obvious Corcoran didn't want that particular kid to be a murderer. But he answered.

"He was about ten or eleven. Might be older. He's small and thin, so it's hard to tell. Dark hair. Red jacket, bluejeans, dark schoolbag. You don't see many kids carrying books around here. And he wasn't big enough to crack anybody's skull."

The detectives headed for the school. In the car Ben said, "You don't have to be big to crack somebody's skull. That's the trouble, you know? Either we get witnesses who don't want to get involved, or we get them with biases. Nobody's objective in this world."

"If we're lucky, maybe this kid was late, too," said Nate. They were passing the bar on the corner of the victim's street. He pointed it out and made a right turn on the next block.

"One thing we know," he added. "The kid was probably the last one near the victim's house who might've seen anything at all. The winos place him there. Corcoran puts him there. Perp or not, we've got to talk to him."

"Yeah. After we find out who

he is. How many do you think have red jackets?"

Nate pulled to the curb in front of the school without turning the car around. Mounting the steps, he took a moment to absorb the character of the old brick building. Its windows protected by wire mesh, its doors made of metal so thick it could sheathe army tanks, the structure presented an image of defensive dignity. Ben lumbered up to join him.

"The halls of education look like a fortress in Libya. I ask you. What kind of kids do they expect to turn out of a place like this?" he asked.

"You and me, for two," Nate answered.

Ben turned to him in amazement. "You saying the schools are the same now?"

"Close enough."

Ben shook his gray head and opened the heavy door.

"I'm surprised it's not locked. C'mon, maybe we'll run across a kid in a red jacket with a breaker bar sticking out of a scholarly looking schoolbag."

The detectives emerged in ten minutes. Except for the three already known, no late passes had been issued Monday morning. Queries about red jackets and dark schoolbags had produced shrugs.

They crossed the street and walked into the alley next to the

luncheonette. Ben made noises of disgust every step of the way. "The Health Department erased this street," he declared.

In the yard they stood away from the dumpster. Nate pointed to the premises on the other side of the fence.

"That's the rear of the victim's building. That's the alley where the winos saw the kid."

"Uh-huh," said Ben.

They learned nothing looking at the place and were about to return to the luncheonette's entrance when its rear door opened. A balding fat man came out holding a black plastic bag of trash. He stopped when he saw them.

"Cops, again? I told the others yesterday I didn't see nothing in the morning. I was inside waiting on customers. They didn't see nothing either." He went to the dumpster and pushed in the bag.

"Are you the owner?" Nate inquired.

"Yeah. Arnie Havershaw. You got my statement already."

"You sure you didn't see a kid come over the fence yesterday? One wearing a red jacket?" Ben asked.

"Him? Not yesterday. I wasn't outside that early."

The detectives stared at him.

"Geezus, you know the kid? How come you didn't tell the of-

ficers about him yesterday?" Ben demanded.

Havershaw turned and crossed his arms over his stained apron. "Nobody asked about him is how come. They asked who I seen in the morning. I didn't see nobody. I ain't seen that kid for a week. If he came over again, it was earlier or later than I was outside. What, should I list everybody I ever seen?"

Ben's lip curled in a snarl. Nate jumped in before his partner made matters worse.

"Okay, sir. We understand that you've seen him before but not yesterday. Do you know his name?"

"Nope."

"Where he lives?"

"Nope."

"Would you know him if you saw him? If we wait with you when school lets out, could you identify him in a crowd?"

"Sure, but you don't need me or nobody else for that."

"Why not?"

"'Cause alls you have to do is wait outside the school. He's the first one out the door. Better be ready if you plan to catch him, though. He's gone before a fast count of three, up toward the avenue."

They went back to the car. Nate drove around the corner to the crime scene. They stood on the step looking up and down

the block. Even now, at ten thirty when all the stores were open, it was a quiet street.

"Can't count out Corcoran," Ben mused. "Could've come back when the kids were gone. Wouldn't use a karate chop either. Be like signing his name. If he always brings his laundry on Mondays, he could know the ladies' routine as well as anybody. Probably knows a lot of people around here."

"True," said Nate.

"Could be a wino. They get around enough to see everybody."

"Right," said Nate.

"Could still be the first three. Double back after Corcoran left. Tavern guy misses them. Make the hit, run to school, hide the weapon. Still get there by nine twelve."

"Yeah."

"Or the kid in red. Might've waited in the alley where Corcoran lost him. Winos don't know what time they saw him. Teacher might've let him off without a pass."

"Yeah."

"Can't you say something useful?" asked Ben.

"Yeah. I'd like to talk to the winos myself. No telling what else got missed yesterday. Too bad they're gone."

"Who'd you talk to yourself?" Ben asked.

"The UPS guy, the victim's

son, the neighbor, the surrounding store owners, the bartender, the three kids."

"Could be the neighbor. Might've known the other victims, too. Best cover in the world, being an old lady," Ben offered.

Nate smiled. "You decide. I told her I'd stop by today to see how she's doing." He opened the street door. They entered the vestibule, where markings of the victim's body were still on the floor. He rang a bell. A cultured voice came over the intercom to ask who was calling. When he identified himself, a buzzer admitted them. They climbed a creaking staircase to find a diminutive lady waiting in her doorway.

"Good morning, Detective Calhoun. Who's that with you?"

"Good morning, Mrs. Ekroth. This is Detective Sherman."

Beatrice Ekroth had snow-white hair brushed into a neat bun. She held out her hand to Ben. For a second he looked unsure whether to shake it or kiss it. He opted for a wimpy clasp so as not to crush the fragile bones. "Pleasure to meet you, ma'am."

"The pleasure is mine, detective. Do come in. Have you any clues yet?"

"A few," Nate answered with a straight face.

Ben took in a row of mystery

novels on a long glass table. He avoided Nate's glance.

"Please sit down. May I get you coffee or tea?"

They declined and took a seat on her surprisingly modern, multiple-pillowed white couch. She sat across from them.

"Feeling better today?" Nate asked.

"Yes, thank you. The shock, you know, was produced by the cause of Annie's death. As for death itself, one becomes accustomed to it after the age of seventy. The vacuum widens, of course. Lives, like houses, move from occupied to vacant."

Ben shuddered inwardly but said nothing. For him, the age of seventy was only sixteen years away. Already he'd lost some friends and family. He wondered how many more would be gone in the next decade and a half. Next to him, Nate nodded sympathetically, but what did he know? He was only, what—thirty-eight, forty? Ben still saw him as the kid he'd broken in eighteen years before. Those years were a lot different than the next sixteen would be. The lady was talking.

"No, I'm a reader, detective. It was Annie—Mrs. Lofton—who enjoyed looking out the window."

"You haven't recalled anyone unusual hanging around lately? Someone new? Maybe walking a dog?"

"You're trying to discover who might have been 'casing the place'? I can't imagine. We're not wealthy women. Who would bother? Well, I suppose someone did, but I never took note of him. All I've seen are my neighbors, the usual derelicts, the mailman, the occasional rowdy teenagers. I'm sorry."

Downstairs, Ben said, "Okay, so she's not a likely. Notice she said the same thing as the other neighbors? It's got to be someone who fits right in."

"Mmm. And fades right out."

"Yeah, maybe down alleys, or carrying laundry."

They walked to the bar on the corner. The man Nate had questioned yesterday was there, but this time Ben asked the questions. He got nothing new. The bar had been closed. It didn't open till eleven. The only reason the owner noticed the three boys at all was that he was finishing the job of cleaning his front window when they passed. But then he turned away to wash the floor, didn't look outside again until cops knocked on the door.

"How about later?" Nate asked. "Any of the winos show up with more money than usual?"

"You know better'n that. Winos don't sit inside to drink. Too expensive."

"Just wondering."

"I'da told ya if something like that happened."

They returned to the precinct, added what little they had to the existing reports, and ate a late lunch. Two forty-five found them sitting in the car outside the school. Nate had turned the car to face the avenue.

At three o'clock the muffled sound of a bell reached their ears. The door opened less than ten seconds later. A kid wearing a red jacket adjusted the straps of a navy colored backpack and ran down the steps.

Nate started the car, cursing himself for not having it already in gear. The traffic light on the avenue went yellow but not before he turned left on a dime, plastering Ben to the passenger door as he did. Ben fumbled for the magnetic strobe to stick on the roof, but Nate, eyes glued to the kid, who was flying more than a block ahead of them, told him to forget it.

"I don't know what his first name is," said Ben bracing himself on the dashboard, "but I bet his last name is Johnson or Bailey."

First out again, Carlo thought happily. Not a kid in sight anywhere. Halfway down the block he heard an engine roar to life; but that meant zero. A school-bus in the yard, maybe. And the

light was with him. Smooth sailing all the way home.

Behind him he heard the unmistakable squeal of a car taking a corner on two wheels but thought nothing of it. No kid in school was old enough to drive, and he hadn't made anyone older mad at him. Not yet, anyway. He was almost on his corner when a dark blue sedan braked sharply to the curb in front of him. A guy who looked too old to be a cop stuck a badge out the window. Carlo stopped short.

"Hey, kid, hold up. We have to talk to you."

Carlo stood still. It wasn't a police car. Sometimes old guys hired kids to steal hubcaps and stuff. But if they were cops it wouldn't look good to run away.

The doors opened, and two men got out. The other guy was younger, looked more like a cop, but you never knew. Carlo took a step backward.

"It's okay," said the younger one. "We just want to ask you some questions."

"About what?" Carlo asked.

"An old lady got killed yesterday morning," said the old guy. "You were on her street around the time it happened."

"I was?" Carlo stared and recalled the previous morning. Oh yeah, that was when he ran up ... oh man.

"What ole lady?" he croaked.

"Look, son," said the younger

one. "How about you come to the precinct with us? Just for a statement. Nobody's accusing you of anything. Okay?"

"How do I know you're cops?" said Carlo. "Everybody's got fake badges, man." Not everybody, but if they weren't who they said, let them think he knew what was going on. They looked at each other, back at him. The young one grinned.

"They do? I didn't know that." He went to the car, reached in, and turned a knob, increasing the volume of a dispatcher's instructions. "Not everybody has one of these," he said.

Carlo got in the back seat. The old guy said, "My name is Detective Sherman, that's Detective Calhoun. What's yours?"

"Carlo Crespo."

"Carlo, do you mind if I see your backpack? I'm curious about your schoolbooks. Just this morning my partner and me were wondering if school is still the same."

"Sure," said Carlo. He passed it over the seat. The detective pulled out his history book, math book, pens, pencils. He handed it back just as the car turned into a small yard next to a station house.

"Is it the same?" Carlo asked.

"Yeah, except my history book ended with Eisenhower."

"Wow, you must be pretty old," said Carlo. Too late he re-

membered his mother's warning about never mentioning a person's age. Luckily no one got mad. They both laughed.

"Yeah, and drooling to retire," said Sherman.

Inside the building a bunch of men were standing, sitting, talking. Some had uniforms, some didn't. Carlo wondered if those in regular clothes were crooks. A guy at a desk looked at Carlo, then at Detective Calhoun.

"Hey, Nate, you're supposed to throw that size back."

"Funny," said Calhoun. They steered Carlo to a smaller room where the two detectives sat behind desks but not before the old one had brought Carlo a can of soda, for him a rare drink. His mother only brought home milk and apple juice.

Ben likes the kid, Nate thought as he sharpened a pencil, and that's no mean accomplishment for a street kid. Can't let it get in the way, though. Kids more innocent looking than this had turned out to be killers. Well, at least the schoolbag was clean. He got a sheet of paper, took the kid's info: address, mother's name, mother's job and phone number, no address for the father, not even a name. Carlo's age was eleven. Nate told him the name of the woman who'd been killed,

where she lived. The kid looked astonished.

"Carlo, do you know three boys named Georgie Leach, Lyle Stokes, Duane . . ."

"Them. Yeah."

"See them yesterday morning?"

"Yeah; they chased me."

"Where to?"

"Across from the lady's house. They do it?"

"We don't know yet. Did they make you late for school?"

"Nah, not much. Couple of seconds maybe."

"Didn't need a late pass?"

"Ms. Haywood don't make you get one if it's right near the bell."

Nate made a note. His arrival could be checked easily. If true, it put him in class during the murder.

"Okay, Carlo. Tell us what you saw, what you did, after you turned onto the lady's street."

The kid took a swallow from the can in his hand.

"Didn't see much. Stores were closed, I know that. I saw the lady upstairs, just sitting. And a guy walking."

"What did the guy look like?" Ben asked.

"Big dude. Not fat, though. Like a . . ."

"Weightlifter?" Nate suggested.

"Yeah. Brown leather jacket. Nice."

"Nice gloves, too?" Ben asked.

The kid thought, then said, "Nah, he didn't have any."

"Go on."

"Then I went under a Taurus that was parked. Then Georgie and them came around the corner. Man, they stopped right near me. Asked him where I was, but he didn't say. Then I . . ."

Nate came to attention. Corcoran hadn't mentioned that. Nate thought he would have.

"Hold it, Carlo. Who did they ask?"

"Had to be the dude. It was kinda loud, the way you talk when somebody ain't near you. I guess it coulda been the lady upstairs. Anyhow, nobody told on me."

"Go on."

"Then I saw brown Dockers walk by. The guy's, you know? Most people would've stayed across the street, but that guy crossed over and walked right through them. No fear."

The kid looked mystified, as well he should, Nate thought. He wouldn't walk through that trio himself.

"Then what happened?"

"I heard a phone ring and a window close. The lady's, I think. Then they left."

"Did you see where they went?"

"Up the avenue. Crossed by the bar. After they turned, I

waited a couple of seconds and came out. The guy in the leather jacket was still on the corner. I thought . . . nah, never mind. Then I went in the alley."

"Back up," said Ben. "What did you think about the man on the corner?"

"That he gave me the nod, you know? That it was okay. But he probably didn't. Nobody does that."

"He probably did. He stayed on the corner to make sure you were okay."

"You kidding?"

"He told us," said Ben.

But they both knew, Nate thought, that Corcoran could've stayed for another purpose.

"Now these next parts are real important," Ben continued. "Was anybody else around when you went into the alley?"

"Sure. The winos."

"Besides them."

The kid lifted the soda again. He seemed to be thinking very hard.

"Nobody, man."

"Maybe you heard someone behind a door? The lady's door?"

Carlo shook his head. "I didn't hear nobody, or see nobody else. Only the winos. They were sleeping, except the one who was sitting right near the sidewalk." He put the soda on Nate's desk and pulled his legs up on the chair. "Like this," he said. "When he

heard me, he looked up, but his head fell down again."

Nate leaned back and sighed. Winos. The most nondescript men in the city. Impossible to identify. Everyone thought they looked alike.

"He had a beard," Carlo offered.

Nate sat up.

"A beard?" No wino with a beard had been questioned. He exchanged the information with Ben by a glance, sure that Ben hadn't read those reports.

"What else?"

Carlo shook his head. "Just dirty, like the rest. Coat dirty, pants dirty, gloves dirty, hat dirty. Squinty eyes."

"Gloves?"

"Yeah, most of them have gloves. Ground is cold at night."

Again Nate glanced at Ben. Neither wanted to ask the kid how he knew that. More important, they now had a nonsleeping man wearing gloves a few feet from the victim's door.

"What happened after you saw him?" asked Ben.

"Nothin'. I went over the fence and went to school. Beat Georgie and them. They didn't even make the corner till I was on the steps."

"You saw them?" Nate asked.

"Yeah. They saw me, too. Yelled and stuff."

Nate spent no time wondering why they hadn't said so.

While Carlo's statement could support theirs, they probably thought the fact that they'd chased him would bring more trouble than the substantiation was worth.

"Why do they chase you?" Ben asked.

"For my lunch ticket mostly. And to hassle me, I guess."

"You could outrun them easily," Nate pointed out. "Why do you go down strange streets and alleys?"

The kid took the soda off the desk again. His neck turned red. The redness rose quickly to his face. "Don't want kids at school to see me running from them is why. If they think I'm scared, I'd only get hassled more."

They were down to two possibilities. Corcoran and a wino.

Ben stood up. "I'll call Corcoran," he said.

Nate nodded. Ben could make the call from his desk, but it would save time if, while he was doing it, Nate could get a detailed description of the wino without distractions. The kid turned out to be observant.

"He had one of those heavy navy jackets. Blue, almost black."

"A pea coat?"

"I don't know what you call it."

"Go on."

"Cords. You know, pants? Not ripped, but real dirty. Brown, with lots of stains."

"Shoes?"

"I think boots. Black, I think."

"Could you tell how high they were?" Deep enough to conceal a breaker bar and they might, just might, have their perp.

"No, his pants were over them. Listen, man, I don't think he coulda done it."

"Why not?"

"'Cause his head fell down. Looked wasted, sick or something."

"Maybe he didn't want you to get a good look at his face."

"Wow. You think so?"

"I hope he was wrong. Did you get a look at his face?"

"Yeah. The beard, like I said. And real squinty eyes. And he had on one of those hats, like a sweater. Same color as the coat."

"A knit cap?"

"Yeah, but it was a little back. You could see he didn't have much hair up front, you know?"

Nate wrote down everything. When he looked up, he saw Carlo staring at the map on the wall.

"That's the city," Nate told him.

"Oh. Not the world?"

"No. You like maps?"

They talked for awhile. Nate wondered what was taking Ben so long, and how, if Corcoran proved to be innocent, it would be possible to introduce him to this kid. He was sure Corcoran

would give his eyeteeth to teach Carlo how to defend himself. Ben walked in looking excited.

"Corcoran said it wasn't him the kids asked. He was crossing the street at the time, never saw them look up at the victim's window. Thought they were talking to each other. So I called the hoods. Only got the Stokes kid. Leaned on him a bit. Told him Carlo got them off a murder rap but we could still get them for harassment. Told him we'd let them off if he told us who they spoke to on the street. Guess who?"

"A wino," said Nate.

"No good I.D. except for one thing."

"A beard."

"Only the guy wasn't sitting like Carlo says. He was standing against the building in the alley having a smoke when they saw him. Then he slid down, like he was sick."

Carlo had been looking back and forth between the detectives as they spoke. At Ben's last remark they saw his neck turn red again. He turned to Nate.

"Geez, man, I never seen that. I never seen him at all till I went in the alley. I thought he was wasted."

"It's okay," said Nate. "You were probably at the wrong angle and busy looking at stores and cars. Nobody sees everything." He handed his notes to Ben.

Ben read Carlo's description.

"You saw plenty, kid. Want to help us find him?"

They were back in the car at four twenty, cruising the streets, slowing at the appearance of every derelict, but not in the immediate vicinity of the last killing. When Carlo asked about that, Nate explained.

"He'll stay away from that street for awhile. But this is the neighborhood he knows. We're hoping he's still around."

"Amen to that," Ben added. "If he moves, it could be to any of a thousand alleys. Nate tell you this guy killed twice before? Got himself a regular system."

They saw another wino weaving along the street. Nate slowed again, but the man was wearing a red cap and green jacket, and there was no reaction from Carlo. Moreover, it wasn't likely he'd spend money on "new" clothes when it was booze he needed.

"How come nobody seen him before?" Carlo asked.

"They might've, but on the others the time slot wasn't so good. That means the bodies weren't found till a long time after they were killed. When people are asked to remember who they saw in a certain fifteen or twenty minute period, they're likely to remember. Ask them who they saw three or four

hours later, it gets harder. They saw too many in between."

"Hey, man. You just passed an alley."

Kids and winos, Nate thought. They know the city better than cops. He pulled over and backed up. The passage was narrower than most. Hardly noticeable. Four or five derelicts holding brown paper bags sat in a row. One wore a blue coat.

"Remember, he might've shaved," said Nate.

"I'd know him anyway," said Carlo. "He ain't there."

"I got a feeling this guy's a loner," said Ben.

Traffic was on the increase, and so was pedestrian activity.

"Hey, what time is it?" asked Carlo.

"Five o'clock," Nate answered.

"I gotta be home by six. Mom comes in at a quarter after."

"Hey, look there," said Ben.

They were half a dozen blocks from Carlo's school, near a fenced-in park that had seen greener days. A basketball net hung askew on half a backboard. Against the pole beneath it sat a wino with a beard and a dark coat. A brown paper bag was between his knees. He raised it to his lips. In the back seat the detectives heard a sharp intake of breath.

"We got him," said Ben.

Nate shook his head in disbelief. Sometimes you just got

lucky. Lucky? What was he thinking? Eight weeks they'd been at this. Leaving the car, they told Carlo to stay put.

Carlo sat and watched, hypnotized by what followed. Calhoun and Sherman entered the park and dragged the guy to his feet. They patted him down. He saw them pull a long piece of metal out of the man's boot, take stuff from his pockets. Watched them talk to the wino, though he couldn't hear what they said. Saw them put his hands behind his back and cuff him. Saw Sherman pick up the paper bag and squat down to look at the ground while Calhoun half-carried the guy to the opening in the fence. Carlo grabbed his schoolbag and jumped out of the car. He wasn't going to sit next to that guy. No way. He left the rear door open so Calhoun could put the man in the back seat, but he didn't do that. Muttering cursewords, the wino slipped to the ground, leaned against the rear tire. Calhoun left him there and shut the door.

"That's him, man," said Carlo.

"I know. Wait just a second."

He got in the front seat and spoke softly into a mike. Standing away, Carlo stared at the heap on the sidewalk. On television killers dressed sharp, looked smart. This guy looked

dopey, smelled like a dirtbag. Sherman arrived carrying stuff in a plastic sack. A couple of cars slowed down to take a look. Sherman waved them on. Still in the front seat, Calhoun put the mike back on a hook and opened his notebook. He turned a couple of pages, then made a call on a cell phone. Then he got out of the car and went and talked to Sherman, who nodded several times. The wino kicked at the air in front of him. The detectives ignored him. Carlo backed away.

"Hey, I'm goin' home now, okay?" he called.

"Wait a minute. A patrol car is coming," Calhoun said.

"For me?" Carlo yelled. "Listen, man, I don't need no cop to take me home. I'll just go, okay?" The wino had started shouting. Carlo backed farther away, put his schoolbag on his shoulders. Sherman walked over.

"He can't hurt you. He's cuffed, and he's drunk."

"Yeah, but listen, man, I gotta go. My mom'll be home soon."

"You gotta stop calling us 'man' is what you gotta do. Call

me Ben, if you want. Now stay put, got it, Carlo?"

"Geez." Carlo went to the fence and sat down. The minute turned into ten, the wino had slipped to the pavement and fallen asleep, before a patrol car pulled up. A man wearing funny clothes got out of the back.

"Glad you called," he said to Calhoun.

Carlo stared at his outfit. It was white and loose with a black cloth belt tied around the middle. He was sockless, as if he jumped into his brown Dockers quickly. Carlo looked at his face. It was the guy on the street Monday morning. He walked around the wino and came over.

"Hey, Carlo, I'm Dave. The cops are busy, but they don't want you going home alone. Mind if I walk you?"

Carlo stood, looked the guy up and down.

"What kinda outfit is that, man?"

"It's called a gi," said Corcoran. "I'll tell you all about it."

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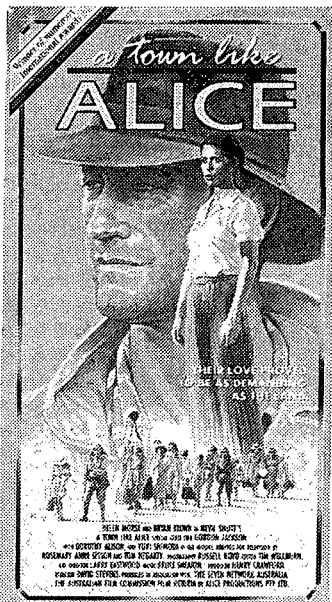
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Line of Sight

Frederick Axtmann

October the eighth. Five o'clock. Early for DeeSay.

His head hurt. It seemed as if every metallic surface on the street was reflecting the afternoon sun straight into his eyes. He snapped on his Porsche cheaters to tune it out.

The street was noisy, but DeeSay was used to noise. From the moment of waking until early the next morning when, sated with drugs, alcohol, boredom, he lost consciousness, there was unceasing noise: television, squalling babies, neighbors fussing, garbage trucks, sirens, jackhammers, scores of competing boom boxes cranked up to the point of distortion with heavy metal salsa soca hip-hop gangsta rap fast food malt liquor cheap furniture easy credit.

And, of course, gunfire.

Under his leather jacket, tucked in his waistband, a 9mm semiautomatic. DeeSay looked on the gun simply as a tool, like a plumber's wrench, with which he made his way in the world. When he needed to get paid, he'd show the jammy: business card, toolkit, invoice, collection agen-

cy, all in one lethal package.

The shrinks and the social workers and the goo-goos fill books with theories as to how someone like DeeSay develops from wide-eyed baby into sociopath. DeeSay would have laughed at those books had he known how to read them, just as he laughed at the social services geeks, the probation officers, the judges, the whole wheezing, creaking machinery that brought him in and turned him loose, time and time again, never grasping the simple truth: the city was a war zone, a jungle, and DeeSay was a predator. Eyes in front. Claws sharp. Hungry.

The name of the game, Jim, was survival.

And no flipping burgers at Mickey D's for the minimum wage, either. That was for the scrubs. The chumps. DeeSay had other venues.

Like the Midtown Mall.

An hour later he located a midnight blue Bimmer parked toward the rear of the lot and shaded from the front by a stepvan. No problem. Cop and blow. The security spotters on the roof might or might not observe the

grab, but even if they did, DeeSay was keeping an eye on the roving vehicle. By the time they directed it here, he'd be there, many blocks away.

She was alone, middle-aged, elegantly coiffed, and carrying a huge leather handbag. DeeSay marveled at the stupidity of the average human being. They might as well wear signs around their necks reading VIC. He'd preyed on shoppers here and in places like it for months, and still they wandered around at night, sheeplike and unattended.

The woman paused to get her keys, and DeeSay was on her, a sudden shadow materializing from the adjoining cars. It was easy. He stripped the pocketbook from her shoulder in one smooth motion and was gone, racing through the actinic glow of the lights toward Division Street, the victim's screams already fading behind him.

Through the months he had developed a routine that had proved both convenient and safe: make the grab; zigzag through a maze of side streets and alleys to a narrow, little-used street behind the train station; get the green (never mind checks or credit cards); throw the rest down a convenient storm drain; and be gone.

He reached the deserted street and retreated into the usual doorway where, in the

faint glow of a streetlamp, he opened the handbag.

The arrow took him full in the chest, pinning him to the oak door. It took DeeSay a few seconds to understand what had happened to him. By then the black aluminum shaft was already slick with blood. Three black feathers glowed softly in the lamplight.

A second arrow whistled out of the dark. The razor tip sliced effortlessly through pocketbook, jacket, and rib cage before embedding itself in the door with a solid *thunk*.

DeeSay tried to reach for the gun, but his body failed him. He hung, arms at his sides, staring goggle-eyed at the brace of black shafts protruding from his abdomen.

"Arrows?" he croaked, disbelieving, through blood-flecked foam.

A train entered the station. The rumble of its approach swelled to a roar, filling DeeSay's head like an immense waterfall.

Then the darkness clamped down.

“A rows?” Lieutenant Ed Bullock sat, black and Bud-dhalike, behind his desk in the Third Precinct house, two hun-

dred pounds of muscle compacted into a five nine frame.

"Arrows," said Sergeant Pete Maroulis, shrugging. "Not cross-bow bolts like you'd figure but actual arrows. I can't recall anyone ever being shot with arrows in the city."

The lieutenant drummed his fingers on the scarred desktop. Maroulis continued.

"DeeSay—Maurice Davis. Lengthy record: snatch and grab, B and E, drug dealing, assault and battery, a conviction for vehicular manslaughter, suspect in a couple of drug-related shootings."

"I take it there will not be an outpouring of grief and resentment from the community."

"Naw, he was a real mutt. A citizen walking his dog down by South Station found him pinned to a door early yesterday morning. Must have been a powerful bow. The arrows were embedded over an inch deep in solid oak. The EMT's couldn't get them out, and we didn't want to cut them until the lab's had a chance to look at them. So they took the door off the hinges and carried Davis in on it. There was a woman's handbag pinned to his stomach."

Bullock stopped drumming and closed his hands into two mahogany mallets.

"Forensics?"

Maroulis flipped through the file.

"One arrow punctured a lung after cutting through a couple of ribs. The other went through his liver. The result was hemorrhagic bleeding. Doc says he was probably dead within sixty seconds.

"No witnesses have come forth, nobody lives on that section of Franklin Street; and a check of the area gave us nothing in the way of physical evidence. Judging from the angle of the arrows, he was shot from directly across the street, probably from an alley next to an electrical supply store."

Bullock got up and walked to the dirt-streaked window.

"Which means someone was waiting for him."

Maroulis nodded. "Sure looks like it."

"Why a bow and arrow?"

"Well, it's quiet. And maybe that's what he knows best."

Bullock formed a pistol out of forefinger and thumb.

"Gun's easier to use, easy to get. Every other fifth grader is carrying a .25 in his lunchbox. You can probably buy a damn bazooka not three blocks from here. Why archery?" He glanced at Maroulis. "And why are you still here?"

He had chosen the weapon carefully.

Years of shooting every type of bow available had demonstrated the

superiority of the longbow. Not many archers used it any more, preferring instead the modern compounds or the glass-reinforced recurves.

But the longbow outshot them all with a smooth quiet cast that only a straight-limbed weapon could supply. Four tempered bamboo laminates, sixty-eight inches long, faced with fiberglass, a Bubinga pistol-grip handle, and a sixteen strand waxed nylon string, all weighing in at less than two pounds. Equally important, it was a takedown model. He had only to loosen two screws, and in a matter of seconds the bow was reduced to two pieces each less than three feet in length: less conspicuous and easier to conceal.

Finally, with a pull of a hundred and ten pounds, it delivered an arrow with devastating power.

He had purchased the weapon from a bowyer in Idaho, using an assumed name and paying cash. The arrows were bought in a sporting goods store outside of Riverton, Wyoming. He was just another bowhunter preparing for the season and would not be remembered.

Within two weeks he had the bow zeroed in and was comfortable with the release. Only one problem remained: he had never killed anything in his life. Never gone to war, never hunted, nev-

er even caught a fish. In fact, he held hunters in contempt, sickened by their capacity for turning weapons on defenseless animals without any reason at all save some warped sense of masculinity. Or mindless cruelty.

But now he knew a bit more about cruelty. He had led a quiet life guided by Rousseau's simple dictum, "What wisdom can you find that is greater than kindness?" But what if your kindness and good intent are answered with violence? Not being a religious man, he could not fall back on the platitudes, the easy answers provided by faith. After much reflection he had come to believe that Robinson Jeffers had it right: "Reason will not decide at last; the sword will decide."

Killing Davis had been the test. It proved that he was capable of doing this thing, that he had successfully hardened his heart against those who had hardened their hearts against him.

Jerry Shamma descended the courthouse steps as rapidly as his corpulent body would allow. He had reached that point in life where booze, rich food, and the force of gravity were beginning to take their toll. The best that Gucci, Armani, *et al.* had to offer couldn't camouflage the lawyer's

florid, jowly face, receding hairline, sagging belly, fallen arches.

Worse, he had passed the age when young women would bestow their favors upon him without the inducement of money. Fortunately, money wasn't a problem for a man more or less devoid of scruples. Jerry Shamma would represent anybody as long as he was well paid.

He was a creative lawyer. Just last week, in a personal injury case, he had presented testimony from his favorite croaker, Dr. Julius Battle. When he asked the good doctor to describe the plaintiff's injuries (two broken legs), Battle, according to plan, had produced two breadsticks and, holding them up in front of the jury, had snapped them in half as he described in vivid detail the injured man's trauma. Every juror had winced. Shamma won the case.

He labored often for the defense in criminal trials as well, and his philosophy there was simple: no matter how repulsive the client, no matter how hideous the crime, no matter how overwhelming the evidence, never, ever admit guilt. Indict someone else—the parents, the schools, the cops, junk food, the whole of society—anyone but your client.

And he'd done all right. He wore custom threads, drove a red

Viper, and flew to the islands whenever he felt like some sun.

Today the judge had called a two-hour recess, and Shamma was on his way to lunch where he hoped to meet a hot little paralegal whom he had designs on. Crossing Court Street, he paused in front of Wilhelm's display window to check his appearance.

Just then someone punched him in the back, between the shoulder blades. At that same instant the plate glass window shuddered and cracked. Looking down, Jerry Shamma saw something absurd: sticking out of his chest, piercing his new imported silk regimental tie (Royal Scots Greys, ninety-five dollars from Wilhelm's), was an arrow. It was the arrowhead, a wicked-looking three-vened razor, that had cracked the now bloody glass.

Shamma slumped, caught himself, looked again at his reflection in the window. The crack in the glass split his image in half.

He slumped to his knees. A woman began to scream.

It was the last thing he ever heard.

Ed Bullock was not in a good mood. He looked as if he'd been in a knife fight which, in a way, he had: he'd tried every brand of safety razor on the

market, but most mornings he still managed to look as if he'd gone through the windshield. He was going to have to go back to an electric shaver, and they gave him an annoying rash.

Then there was this lunatic running around town opening people up with a bow and arrow.

"What's going on here, Pete?"

Maroulis shook his head. "Damned if I know. This one's Shamma, Jerry; member of the bar, defender of scum. He's the shyster who first used the full-moon defense. Claimed that since the human body is ninety-something percent water, it can be influenced by malevolent celestial bodies like Mars. Sort of an evil tidal effect. Put a couple of quack astrologers on the stand to so testify."

"I remember that case. He lost it."

"That he did. But it provides an indication of his capacity for sleaze. He's also done some work for the mob."

"Aims low and hits the mark."

"Every time."

"Any connection with Maurice Davis?"

"None that we can find. He never defended him, and I can't imagine them chatting over brie and merlot at Estelle's."

Bullock nodded at the tabloid on his desk. "You see this?"

"Yeah. Robin Hood, for crissake."

Bullock rocked back in his chair. "We got a wack job running loose, filling people full of arrows, and the press loves it. Wait until this creep takes out a kid, or an editor. Then it'll be 'POLICE IDLE WHILE MANIAC BUTCHERS CITIZENRY.'" He rocked down. "What's the program?"

"Well, we're still digging on Shamma; a guy like that makes enemies. We're canvassing every place that sells archery equipment. We've talked to the proprietors of all the archery ranges in the area, and we're interviewing the members of the Tri-Valley Bowhunters Association. Trouble is, we don't know exactly what we're looking for other than a highly proficient bowman who's slightly sprung."

"Is this a random thing, Pete?"

Maroulis considered the question carefully.

"I think so. And yet—it's just a feeling, but this second one . . . we figure he shot from a grove of trees just inside the park. Now, that's a distance of over one hundred and fifty yards through a fairly crowded landscape. It wouldn't seem possible that anyone could take out a specific target under those conditions with a bow. But it bothers me."

"Why?"

"It was a perfect shot. A heart shot. I mean, he *meant* to kill

Shamma. He wasn't just firing into the crowd."

Bullock listened, said nothing. He himself was sure it was random, but Maroulis was a methodical cop and Bullock respected his judgment. If he thought "Robin Hood" was selecting specific targets, then he'd let him go with that. For awhile.

If he wanted to know anything about archery, Maroulis was told, he'd have to see the expert, Art Speedwell.

Speed's Archery Shop was on the western outskirts where town gave way to country and if the wind was right you could catch the good honest aroma of cow manure.

Speedwell was a bear of a man, about six and a half feet tall, maybe three hundred pounds, unruly gray hair, gray whorled beard, blue flannel shirt that strained to contain his stomach, screaming red suspenders to hold the whole thing together. He lifted the arrow up to the light and adjusted his glasses.

"That's a Hawk shaft. About the best shaft available." A gentle voice coming from such a big man, thought Maroulis.

"The arrowhead is a top-of-the-line broadhead: at least one hundred grains, hollow-ground tip, sharp enough to shave with,

strong enough to drive right through bone."

"Any way to tell who sold this?"

Speedwell shook his shaggy head. "Not really. Got to be twenty, thirty dealers within a hundred miles of here. All of them carry Hawks. Same with the broadheads." He laid the arrow on the glass countertop.

"Sort of out of fashion, isn't it? Hunting people with bow and arrow?"

Maroulis nodded.

"I read in the paper about the second one," said Speedwell. "They said over a hundred and fifty yards. Is that true?"

"It is. Tell me, exactly how difficult a shot is that, and how many people could make it?"

The old archer lowered himself onto a stool that responded with an ominous creak.

"Know much about archery, sergeant?"

"I shot a few times in the Cub Scouts."

"Uh-huh. Well, let me give you a quick rundown, historically speaking. Bows have been around a long time. Nobody's sure exactly how long. The ancient Turks were excellent archers, and our native Americans were no slouches, either.

"But you have to go back to the fourteenth century if you want to see the bow in all its glory. During the Hundred

Years War the longbow decided several major battles, like Crécy and Agincourt. In those engagements the English were greatly outnumbered, you see—six or eight to one. They prevailed because of the longbow.”

Speedwell popped a mint into his mouth, folded his arms, and continued.

“Consider this: English archers were trained from early childhood with the bow, same as Japanese kids are with the sword today. As men they fired bows with draw weights of seventy to a hundred and twenty pounds, maybe more. The longbow was lethal at well over two hundred yards, and an experienced English archer was not expected to miss at that distance.”

“That’s a lot of bow to pull.”

“Yes, and the results were devastating. Those guys could loose twelve well-aimed shafts in sixty seconds; shafts that were capable of penetrating two inches of oak. There’s a record of one of William de Braose’s knights being struck in the leg by a Welsh arrow that punched through his armor, his leather tunic, his thigh, the armor on the inside of his leg, the saddle, and the horse, killing the animal.

“The French took to carrying around huge steel-plated shields. You see, the English

discovered that by applying wax to the tips of their arrows, they could penetrate ordinary body armor. Sort of the Teflon bullet of its time.

“As for accuracy—at the battle of Caen, I believe it was, about a hundred French soldiers decided it would be a good idea to insult the English by baring their backsides at them—from what they thought was a safe distance, of course. Every one of them died rather painfully.”

“Unbelievable,” said Maroulis.

“It is, but they were that good. The longbow was the ultimate weapon of the fourteenth century.”

“Can anyone shoot that accurately today?”

Speedwell nodded. “A few. Probably not with the longbow. But with the new compound bows, a hundred pound pull, for example, reduces to about half that. Of course it’s one thing to perforate paper, another to shoot a person.”

“How do you grade a shot like this last one, the one from the park?”

“If he hit the person he was aiming for, at that distance and through all that traffic—pedestrians, signs, wires, never mind the breeze, if any—then you’ve got a highly-skilled archer here, someone who’s been at it for a long time.” He picked up the ar-

row again. "One other thing: the color here."

"What about it?"

"Well, you can buy black shafts, but stock arrows usually come with colored feathers. These are black. Which means he may have replaced the original fletching, unless he dyed these."

"Why would he use all-black arrows?"

Speedwell opened a new package of mints. "Don't rightly know. Maybe it's like a signature. A calling card."

Ben Mays stood on the corner of First and Roosevelt eating a hot dog from Rick's Rolling Rotisserie and scanned the front page of *The Bugle*.

The Bugle was blaring today: "ROBIN HOOD STRIKES AGAIN," et cetera. The reporter shook his head. Robin Hood was the wrong reference. True, the first victim was a predatory maggot, the second a lawyer who defended maggots. But one was poor, one rich, and no redistribution of funds was involved. As usual, *The Bugle* had demonstrated its illiteracy.

Mays had a different Englishman in mind: one John Amend-All. He finished the hot dog and chucked the tabloid into a garbage can, already visualizing the headline in tomorrow's *Sun-Messenger*.

His paper would get it right.

Funny, he thought, how some people's names so aptly described them.

On Front Street there was a bookseller named Page. He knew a local politician named Palmer; a preacher named Bellows. There was Fierman the arson investigator, Reed the clarinet player; LaBore the dentist; and the offensive lineman with the Pumas, Melvin Bigger.

It was as if their names had shaped their destinies.

And then there was Shamma, the lawyer. Just so.

He applied a thin bead of glue to the edge of a black feather and set it in the fletching device. Sunlight spilled through the glass sliders and burnished the pine floor. Beyond, the lawn rolled down to the river where willows swung gracefully in the breeze. Save for his breathing, the big house was silent.

After Shamma he had been beset with doubts, nagged by the question of where the line between principled action and fanaticism fell. Was he one of them, a madman running around settling grudges with a weapon? That was undoubtedly how the police would view it.

But this was more than a grudge. The two people closest to him in the world had been shorn of their lives, not by an accident but by evil people who

should have been in jail, who *would* have been in jail had those sworn to protect the innocent done their job. But they hadn't, and because of their callousness the house in which he resided was no longer filled with love and laughter. Only silence.

Whenever the death penalty was discussed, people shied away from talking about revenge. Revenge was deemed a base motive for taking a life in civilized society, rendering the avenger, so the argument went, no better than the criminal. And that was the line that he had chosen to cross: he no longer had a problem with revenge. In the not-so-distant past revenge had been considered a virtue among honorable men.

He glanced at a photograph on the table. Two women, mother and daughter, eyes squinting against the sunlight, tennis rackets slung carelessly on their shoulders. Smiling.

He turned back to the newly-cemented black feather. He was no longer a father or a husband. He was a technician now, a repairman. Something had gone terribly wrong with the system. A correction was necessary. Several corrections, in fact. He had assembled his tools and applied himself to the task.

The police were not stupid. It was only a matter of time before they suspected him. So be it. All

the more reason to proceed quickly. He had made his decision, and that decision was vengeance.

It was all that mattered any more.

Judge Harold Maitland stepped onto the seventeenth green, putter in hand. His approach shot positioned him a scant six feet from the cup.

His golfing partner, a fleshy young man wearing peagreen pants and a yellow shirt, walked to where his ball sat a good twenty feet from the flag. He eyed Maitland's ball.

"You can't do anything wrong today, judge."

Maitland smiled. It was a Wednesday afternoon and rather than being cooped up in court with squabbling lawyers, he was getting in eighteen holes.

Years ago he had discovered the secret to stress-free living: plea bargains. Urge the defendant to accept a deal, and you got the day off. So far this year Maitland had tried only four felony cases. This had resulted in a marked improvement in his short game, especially his wedge shots.

On top of that, he was ahead today by ten holes—an even hundred bucks. Indeed, it seemed he could do no wrong.

He pulled the flag out of the cup and stepped aside so the other man could putt.

Brad Lightman was a mediocre attorney and a lousy golfer. He was also Maitland's son-in-law. The jurist took a perverse pleasure in trouncing the lad on the golf course, on the tennis court, and in cribbage as well. The boy was a natural loser. Maitland was at a loss to understand what his daughter saw in this anemic wimp.

Lightman bent over his putter and eyed the shot. In the distance, laughter; someone calling, "Fore"; the bells of Trinity Church ringing the half hour. Lightman took two practice swings, then stroked the ball.

Maitland heard a hornet buzz behind him. Then an explosion of pain as something tore into his back. He crumpled to the grass, gasping for help. His legs would not respond to his desire to stand up.

Lightman stood transfixed with horror, gazing at the black feathers that had suddenly sprouted in his father-in-law's back. A foursome on the adjoining fairway dropped their clubs and rushed toward the stricken man.

Lightman's ball rolled to the edge of the cup, hesitated, then dropped for a birdie. Nobody noticed.

Nor did anyone notice the tall,

powerfully built golfer emerge from the trees two hundred yards away, shoulder his bag, and head nonchalantly toward the clubhouse.

Donald "Doc" Edgecomb was relating a story to his assistant when Maroulis arrived at the morgue.

"So this guy decides to take a dive. He has a corner office on the fortieth floor, a salary in the high six figures, three or four palatial homes, nice family—guess he had nothing to live for, huh? So out he goes, a swan dive from forty floors up." He waved Maroulis into a chair.

"Only guess what? There's a hell of a wind coming off the lake that day, I don't know, sixty, seventy miles an hour. This joker falls eight or ten floors, then the updraft catches him, actually blows him back up a couple of stories and through a window. He comes in like Superman in a big blast of broken glass and lands right on some guy's desk, all shredded and bleeding." He shook his head. "Just wasn't his day."

He looked at Maroulis. "And I know what you want." He found a file from among the dozens on the desk and adjusted his glasses.

"The Honorable Harold Maitland. Encountered a bogey on the seventeenth green. Got an

arrow—let's see—severed his spine at the juncture of the eleventh and twelfth thoracic vertebrae. Punctured kidney, severed renal artery, severed inferior vena cava, hepatic veins—

"Doc, please. Make it easy for me."

"He bled to death. That's the point of that type of arrowhead—no pun intended—to cause severe hemorrhagic bleeding. The arrow deflected a bit when it chewed up the spine, went left, hit the kidney and the spleen." He threw his glasses on the desk and rubbed his eyes. "Nobody saw anything?"

"So far, nobody remembers anything unusual except for Maitland lying on the grass. There were a lot of golfers out that day and a lot of confusion when Maitland was shot."

"He probably hid the bow in his golf bag, put one of those little socks with the tassel over it, and just walked away."

Maroulis agreed. And it had been another long shot. The nearest suitable cover was a stand of oak and maple two hundred yards distant.

Maroulis doubted he could tell one person from another at that range.

"They're calling him. John Amend-All now," said Edgecomb. "The Black Arrow." Maroulis gave him a blank look.

"Do your homework, Pete.

Robert Louis Stevenson. You'll love it. Charles Bronson doing *Death Wish* in the Middle Ages."

What Maroulis needed was a list of the cases in which Maitland and Shamma had shared the same courtroom. That meant a trip to the courthouse. On his way there he reviewed what he knew about the two men.

Judge Harold Maitland had a reputation for being overly concerned with the rights of criminals. He regularly set low bail for violent offenders and often sentenced them, if at all, to time served.

After a couple of the beneficiaries of his leniency went right back out on the street and injured somebody, the District Attorneys' Association and several advocacy groups for battered women demanded that something be done. The State Commission on Judicial Conduct reviewed the judge's actions and made no recommendation. Case closed.

Jerry Shamma, meanwhile, made a career of trying to discredit the police. In case after case he attacked the prosecution on grounds of police misconduct, improper search, entrapment, brutality, racism. He regarded bail requirements for his clients an indignity and an injustice.

Christ, thought Maroulis. What a pair.

He entered the courthouse and went straight to the soda machine. He bought three diet Cokes, drained the first in a single gulp, and popped the top on the second. The third he put in his jacket pocket for later. Diet soda was a concession to his wife's plea that he lose some weight.

Rose Levy presided over the Clerk of the Court's office and had ever since Maroulis could remember. He told her what he wanted. She voiced the usual pro forma complaints, warned Maroulis to stay away from the consoles with his soda, and then proceeded to play her computers like a virtuoso, bringing up the dockets from First District Court for the past ten years, then isolating the cases where Shamma had appeared before Judge Maitland.

One of those cases caught Maroulis's attention: the trial of Eddie Trost for the murder of Amy Packard and George Furman. Maroulis remembered the case. Trost had killed Packard and her boyfriend outside a dance club. Shamma represented Trost at the trial, where he based his defense on diminished capacity. He stated that his client had shot in self-defense, hitting Amy Packard in the

process. Furthermore, claimed Shamma, his client suffered from attention deficit hyperactive disorder and from bipolar disorder, both of which contributed to his temporary instability that night.

Finally, the lawyer said that Trost's confession had been obtained under duress because he had been denied sleep, food, water, and cigarettes for eighteen hours and one of the interrogating officers had repeatedly laid his gun on the table in a threatening fashion.

Judge Maitland barred the prosecution from presenting evidence of Trost's previous felonies, and he ruled the confession inadmissible.

Incredibly, the jury found that Trost had acted in self-defense in killing the boyfriend, even though no gun was found on the body, and convicted him of voluntary manslaughter in Amy Packard's death. He was sentenced to serve five to fifteen years and was released by the parole board at the earliest possible date.

Back at the station, Maroulis visited Records and brought up Trost's rap sheet. The man had a history of violence towards women. On two occasions Judge Harold Maitland had allowed Trost to be released on low bail after the hulking young man had beaten the Packard girl. Af-

ter the second incident, the D.A. asked for substantial bail, citing Trost's priors and his threat to kill Packard. His lawyer—(Shamma again—what a surprise) had protested, noting his client's ties to the community, his father's prominence, and the fact that he was starting a new job.

Maitland reduced bail, and Trost went home that afternoon.

One week later he gunned down Packard and Furman.

Maroulis tossed the printouts aside in disgust. Cases like this filled him with a sense of outrage. What was the point of catching the animals if the judges and the parole boards were just going to administer what amounted to a slap on the wrist? Shamma was a cockroach, but at least Maroulis could understand his motive. He was hired to fight for his client, no holds barred. But what the hell had Maitland been thinking about? No, outrage was not too strong a word for how he felt. He wondered what the parents of the victims were feeling.

There was one more name to check out, and a couple of phone calls. Then he'd be ready for Bullock.

"Andrew Packard."

Ed Bullock's face and neck sported several pieces of bloody Kleenex where the razor had betrayed him.

"Talk to me," he said.

"First," said Maroulis, "he was something of a legend in the archery world back in the seventies. According to the American Archery Association, he won every major tournament for several years running. Nobody could touch him. Then he retired from competition to pursue his career as a consulting geologist. He seems to have done quite well for himself.

"And then there's the matter of his wife. When I was reviewing the dockets, the name Packard rang a bell, so I checked it out. And I was right. Virginia Packard: wife of Andrew. Mother of Amy. She was killed in a car accident a few years ago. There was quite a stink about it. The drunk who hit her had nine—*nine*—priors for OUI for which he never did any time. He just kept on drinking and driving, even after his license was revoked, until he killed Mrs. Packard. Take a guess who it was."

"Maurice Davis."

"You got it. And he received only a year for it." Maroulis proceeded to fill Bullock in on what he knew concerning Maitland, Shamma, and Amy Packard.

"First the wife, then the daughter," said the lieutenant. "Might make a man a little bitter, a little cynical about the justice system."

"Indeed it might."

"Our problem is a lack of witnesses and physical evidence."

"We got another problem, too. Trost is still on parole, living over on Lakeview and working for his old man as a carpenter."

"How did someone like the Packard girl get mixed up with a lowlife like Trost?"

"Trost's old man made a pile of dough in the last building boom, enough to buy a mansion and join the Winchester Country Club where, incidentally, Packard was a member. The kids may have met there."

Bullock shook his head slowly. "The country club. Jesus." He checked his watch and reached for his coat. "Have a talk with Trost, let him know what the score is in case he hasn't figured it out for himself yet. And get Packard in here now. Let's sweat him awhile, see what we get."

"Already tried. Car's in the garage, but nobody's home. I've got the house under twenty-four-hour surveillance. As soon as he shows, we'll bring him in."

Bullock paused in the doorway. "By the way, who is John Amend-All?"

Maroulis smiled. "I had my kid bring the book home from the school library: *The Black Arrow*. It's about this guy, John Amend-All, who goes around Merry Old England greasing

bad guys with black arrows. It was a revenge thing."

"How does it end?"

"Don't know. Haven't finished it yet. But toward the beginning he pins a warning up on the church door." He pulled a paper-back from his pocket and opened it to a bookmark; "It says:

I had four blak arrows under my belt,

Four for the greefs that I have felt,

Four for the number of ill menne

That have oppressid me now and then.

"He then goes on to promise 'a blak arrow in each blak heart.'"

Bullock looked out at the rain. "Great. That's just great."

Eddie Trost spotted the stakeout right away: two cops in a brown Chevy at the end of the block. They were probably scarfing down coffee and doughnuts. Trost sneered. Cops chasing you? No problem. Just throw a bag of doughnuts out the window, you're home free.

He walked one block to the river and made his way along the bank until he was behind Packard's house. There, ignoring the cold, he settled down to wait. The house was dark, but it was early yet. Jail had taught

him patience along with several other interesting skills, one of which he would use tonight.

He waited until two A.M., then picked up the gym bag and stole across the lawn to the garage, where he paused, listening for any noise inside the house. Satisfied, he tried the breezeway door. It was unlocked.

For a moment he considered breaking into the house and stopping Packard's clock while he lay sleeping. Just as quickly he rejected the idea. This way entailed much less risk.

He played the flashlight beam over Packard's blue Mercedes, then lowered himself to the concrete floor and wriggled under the front end of the sports car, careful not to jar it in case there was an alarm.

Sometimes it's wise to lie back and chill, scope out the way things are going down. Sometimes you don't have that luxury: you hang back, the other guy will run up on you. This was one of those times. The fat little cop with the bad breath had made that much clear when he'd offered Eddie police protection.

Police protection! What a joke. Eddie Trost solved his own problems, and he didn't want cops looking over his shoulder when he did it.

Packard was moving fast. A preemptive strike was called for. Do or die. He propped the flash-

light at the proper angle and began to play with the automobile's wiring.

Andrew Packard aimed the remote and clicked off the cartoon show just as the coyote failed again to catch the road-runner. This time the clumsy canid had assembled a huge bow—provided, as usual, by the Acme Company—and positioned himself as the arrow. It had, of course, misfired and flattened his snout. Packard found himself wishing that just once the coyote would succeed.

He stretched out on the hotel bed and reviewed his movements over the past couple of days.

Immediately after killing Maitland he had returned home, changed clothes, sealed the bow and one black arrow in a cardboard mailing tube, and walked to the bus stop, where he caught a ride into town. As he had on two of the other missions, he would rely on public transportation. Only when he'd killed Maitland had he used his car and only then because the sportster had blended in perfectly in the golf club parking lot.

After hiding the weapon where it would next be needed, he had taken a room at the Stanyon for two nights. He ate at his favorite restaurants and did some shopping. He used

credit cards for everything. When the police checked, there would be no question as to his whereabouts for the last forty-eight hours.

And they would check. By now they would be anxious to question him, and he needed just a few more hours before submitting to official scrutiny. By staying in town he had avoided that inconvenience, and this afternoon it would all be over. The media, still in full cry over Maitland's death, would have one more to chew on.

Eddie Trost finished his lunch, wadded the paper bag into a ball, and took a one-hand set shot. Off the board into the garbage can. Two points. Wiping his hands on his jeans, he surveyed the job site with distaste.

Carpentry was all right, but he would have liked a job somewhere out of the city, maybe a nice suburban tract where nobody knew who he was and the housewives were lonely. Trouble was, no one but his father would hire him. The press had declared open season on him after he'd shot his twotiming girlfriend and the creep she'd been seeing. Five years just for doing what any redblooded man would do under the circumstances. Hell, a few hundred years ago that was how you dealt with in-

fidelity and uppityness: with the sword. Damn straight!

He had trouble even getting a date now. His picture had been all over the papers when he'd gotten paroled. It was a big deal—killer free after only five years. What the hell did they know?

He consoled himself with a vision: Packard turning the ignition key of his Mercedes and becoming a Crispy Critter as the car erupted in a fireball.

The Black Arrow! Right. Welcome to the twentieth-century, schmucko. Bows and arrows versus dynamite. You lose.

He clipped on his tool belt and started for the scaffold. Packard was history. Probably already dead as of this morning. After work he'd stop by the Tic Toc for a brew, catch the story on the five o'clock news.

Packard waited until four thirty before making his way to an alley that ran between Fulton and Pearl. It was narrow and dark and littered with sodden papers and broken glass that crunched underfoot.

The buildings on either side were deserted. Just inside he stopped at a boarded-up doorway. Producing a small prybar he proceeded to loosen one side of the plywood panel until he could get his arm inside. There, taped to the door, was the bow

and a single black arrow. He removed them and eased the plywood back into place.

The alley gave way onto Pearl Street and was blocked by a rusted wrought-iron fence and a few sad-looking yews that had somehow found footing in the rubble. Packard strung the bow and crouched behind the bushes. Half a block away he could see three carpenters shingling the second floor of a duplex. He checked his watch: four forty. In twenty minutes the three would pack it in. One of them, a heavy-set man with dirty blond hair, would mount his motorcycle and come tearing down Pearl Street toward Highland Boulevard.

Packard rolled the black arrow between his gloved fingers. Eddie Trost wasn't going to make it to the boulevard. Not today.

Trost glanced at his watch. Ten to five. Close enough. He took off his tool belt and started down the ladder.

The other two exchanged a glance. Eddie saw it and mentally shrugged. Screw them. He was tired—he'd had a late night, after all—and he was thirsty. What could they say? His old man signed their paychecks.

He stashed the tools in the carrier and fired up the Honda. Miller time.

At the first roar of the engine Packard was on his feet, arrow nocked. Trost was knocking off early. Not a problem. There were no pedestrians, virtually no vehicular traffic, still light enough to see the target clearly. He took a deep breath, let it out slowly.

After retiring from tournament competition, he had found a new challenge. Certain field archery ranges featured moving targets. You walked through the woods, rounded a bend, and a mechanical deer might bound across the trail forty yards in front of you. It was snap shooting, perfect training for the instinctive shooter. After several months Packard's aim at a moving target was deadly within forty yards.

He had observed Trost a dozen times, and always it was the same. His speed was constant as he passed the alley, about thirty-five. Packard would take him as he prepared to downshift, about thirty yards distant. No obstructions, no wind, no problem.

Trost kicked the bike into first and let out the clutch. He loved the throaty roar of the pipes, the raw power of the machine, the feeling of windblown freedom that only a motorcycle could provide.

Letting out a whoop, he shift-

*

ed again and thundered past the alley, unaware of death poised over his left shoulder.

Packard took another deep breath, drew the bow until the razor tip was almost touching his knuckle, and let out half the breath. The bike roared by, the racket of its exhaust drowning out the thin nasal twang of the bowstring as Packard released it.

The spiraling black shaft traversed the distance in the space of a second and buried itself in Eddie Trost's back. The bike swerved, hit the curb, and went airborne.

Packard saw it in slow motion: the rear wheel spinning furiously, handlebars slowly revolving to the right as Trost lost control, the shower of broken glass when bike and rider sailed through the display window of a vacant automobile showroom.

He snapped back into real time, sprinted down the alley, replaced the bow behind the plywood, and hammered it shut. Then he made his way unhurriedly back to the bus station.

The bus lurched and swayed from stop to stop, the fumes and engine noise making Packard drowsy. He closed his eyes and considered his immediate future. It would be filled with po-

lice officers, endless interrogations, and, doubtless, moralistic speeches about the perils of vigilantism. The police hated even the idea of vigilantes. They understood that at some level it reflected badly on them, on their inability to get the job done. He had once heard a police spokesman remark that vigilantism was the prelude to lawlessness and chaos.

Well hell, thought Packard, what do they call what's going on out here now?

They had a circumstantial case at best. He had destroyed his fletching equipment, there were no witnesses, no physical evidence leading to him. Only a motive. They would make life miserable for him for awhile, but he was a patient man.

What had John Amend-All said at the conclusion of the book? "The black arrow flieth nevermore."

Well, not for awhile anyway.

There remained the members of the parole board, of course. And then there were all the predatory punks and the bottom-feeding lawyers and the insouciant judges . . .

Later. He'd attend to them later.

He settled his powerful frame deeper into the seat.

After all, he had all the time in the world.

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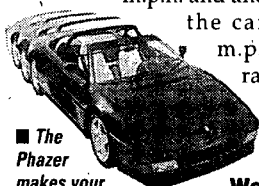
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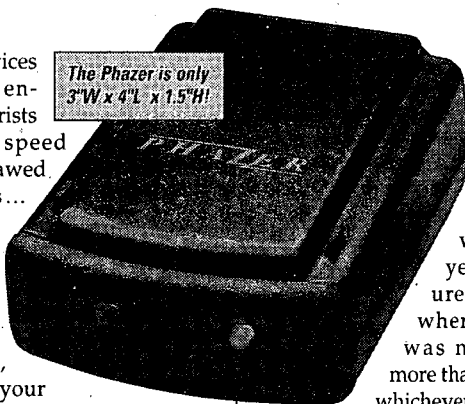
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Alligators Don't Ask for Payment

Stephen Wasylyk

Everyone lives through a bad year occasionally.

The one I was having could definitely be called the Mother of All Bad Years, earned me an invitation to appear on a TV talk show, and left the audience weeping.

My wife had departed and divorced me, taking with her all the assets I foolishly believed had been mutually owned, including the semi-mansion she had insisted we had to have to hold our heads high.

Not an unusual tragedy, and the material loss really didn't bother me. If you're young enough, what you've earned once, you can earn again. Being betrayed by someone you trusted implicitly, who lied so magnificently she should have been awarded the Croix de Ananias with Crossed Palms, well, that was rather upsetting.

I still rapped the side of my skull with my knuckles each morning trying to decide if I was the most naive male ever taken in by a full moon and the scent of jasmine or if a warm, caring

woman had somehow quaffed a witch's potion that overnight turned her into a mean, vindictive shrew.

Then my mother had died, her eyes faintly accusing as if no son of hers would have allowed such a thing to happen.

But as they say, bad things come in threes.

The small corporation I worked for acquired a new CEO, who strode into the lobby shouting, "*Line up, everybody! It's downsize time!*" He then proceeded to fire every fourth standee like a Nazi *Oberleutnant* selecting villagers for execution. Naturally I was eighth in line.

Really hadn't happened exactly that way, of course, but it certainly felt like it.

It didn't end there. My severe mental stress created physical symptoms that put me in the hands of the medical profession. I was pounded, scanned, bled, and X-rayed, and as though I were a side of beef being examined to see if I was fit for consumption, a vari-

ety of probes were inserted into my body's natural orifices by gaily chatting inserters undoubtedly hoping for an excuse to create a few new ones. A very humiliating and demeaning experience.

Stealing a man's money can't compare to stealing his dignity. My ex-wife'd had a great deal to answer for.

With no medical insurance to speak of, the enormous bills wiped out what little money I had left. Flat-ass broke was too mild a term for my financial condition when I extracted a letter from the mailbox in my one-step-above-homelessness apartment house, giving only a passing thought as to how the mailbox predators had missed it. They considered everything to be addressed to them, possibly because they couldn't read.

From the return address, a law firm, I assumed it to be just another dunning letter threatening suit if I didn't pay. One had irritated me so much, I'd picked up a stone, marched into the attorney's office, placed it on his desk, and told him to squeeze it. When it cried for mercy, he could expect a check.

Then I noticed the postmark. Clayton, Pennsylvania.

My mother had been born on a farm near there.

Sucking the painful paper cut I had given myself by opening the

heavy, cream-colored envelope too hastily, I read the stilted legalese that informed Stanford Hardee that his Uncle Ralph had passed away and named him principal heir. Interment was—I glanced at the calendar—at nine tomorrow. As executor, Grover Meisser, Esq., thought I might want to attend, after which we could settle the necessary details.

It was a trip I couldn't afford to make. For the price of a stamp I could authorize him to dispose of the estate and send me the proceeds—if I was stupid enough to ever again trust an attorney. Or for the rest of my life put up with hearing the angry flapping of angel's wings and my mother's voice snapping, "He's your *uncle*, for heaven's sake! We don't do things that way!" "We" was her code word for the family. Very proud of her family, my mother, although I couldn't see we had ever accomplished much but stay out of jail. So far.

Attorney Meisser hadn't anticipated an unexplained post office delay before the letter arrived, but I could still make it by catching an evening flight from Florida to Philadelphia, renting a car, and driving three hours through the night.

I reluctantly fanned out my credit cards, looking for one that might not yet have hit the seize-and-destroy list.

Dozing on the plane, I remembered Uncle Ralph only vaguely, being seven the last time I'd seen him. A tall, raw-boned, blackhaired man, he'd inherited my grandparents' farm. Certainly my mother didn't want it. She'd never considered herself a farm girl, leaving at eighteen, meeting my father, and settling in Harrisburg. She was the opposite of Ralph; small, delicate, honey blonde hair. When he wanted to needle her, my father would say she was the obvious result of a mad, clandestine, passionate romance behind the barn between her mother and a traveling salesman—to be told, naturally, “We don't do things that way.”

We'd visited Uncle Ralph occasionally until my father was transferred to Florida. When my father died, Uncle Ralph hadn't attended the funeral. For some reason my mother wasn't angry. She continued to correspond with him regularly.

She'd talked about him through the years; of the fun they'd had growing up on the farm. I'd expressed little interest when she told me he'd never married because a woman had played him for a fool and left him bitter, thinking that there was no way that would ever happen to me. I must have been sixteen when she told me he never left

the farm. I took no note of that at all, having more important things on my mind like the mysterious, marvelously smooth white thighs of Heidi Johnson.

Having already classified him as weird, I didn't consider it odd when he didn't attend her funeral or when I didn't hear from him afterward. Now I was his principal heir? Some relatives can't be explained.

Well, whatever the reason for his self-imposed confinement, he sure as hell had been in no position to object the day they'd carried him off.

Only a handful of people were at the interment: a pious-faced, middle-aged minister who read from the Bible without enthusiasm and left immediately without spreading the usual hollow condolences around, as though annoyed that his day had been interrupted, and Tom Wellens and his wife, the neighbors who had done whatever shopping had been necessary for Ralph all those years—what my mother had told me seemed to be true, he never left the farm—and had been rewarded with the farm stock and machinery.

In the inevitable dark suit he wore only at weddings, funerals, and on Sunday, his wife in what might have been severe black bombazine and a wide-brimmed black straw hat deco-

rated with fruit, the Wellenses reminded me of Jack Spratt and his wife, although Mrs. Spratt could never have been so warm and friendly as Mrs. Wellens, the only one of us who wept. Someone like her who weeps sincere tears at the passing of a member of the human race, instead of the hypocritical, socially expected ones, is a member of a rare, slowly vanishing tribe.

And Grover Meisser, the attorney. There are stout men, fat men, stocky men, heavy men. Meisser was in a category of his own, appearing to be a pink, smooth-skinned, ageless inflated doll with perfect teeth and black hair. I suspected both were imported from Korea.

He nodded at me. "Shall we go?"

Since I didn't intend to stand and weep like Mrs. Wellens, I nodded in return and followed him to his car.

I'd checked into the motel at two in the morning, tried to sleep, couldn't, had breakfast at seven, and called him.

He'd picked me up, and we'd followed the hearse to the cemetery, nothing unexpected in our completely civilized conversation. Ralph had died in bed in his sleep, he said. Tom Wellens had noticed a lack of activity and had found him. Personally, I noticed the car was recognized, while heads bobbed and hands

lifted in recognition, not in greeting but with deference. Meisser was clearly a power in this town.

He got down to business the moment we left the cemetery. "You intend to sell, of course."

I certainly did, but the assured way he said it made me hedge.

"That's one option, I suppose."

The hand on the wheel twitched slightly.

"Oh? You have something else in mind?"

"Depends. What's the farm worth?"

"I think you can easily get two hundred thousand, perhaps a little more if you wanted to be hardnosed. Several developers are interested."

I put that down as a probe to see how smart I was. The farm had to be worth more. "Exactly what do I own?"

"The land, the house, its contents, and the other structures."

"I could lease it out, surely."

"Hmmm. Risky investment, farming."

He fumbled a key out of his shirt pocket and handed it to me. "I suggest you check out of the motel and live out there until things are settled. You'll have to dispose of the contents, but I'm sure there are items of family interest you'll want to keep. All you need do is stop by my office and sign a few papers. You'll

be liable for the inheritance taxes, but there's no rush about paying."

The smug undercurrent in his voice said he knew I'd damned well have to sell part of the property to pay those.

"The title is clear? No outstanding debts or liens?"

"None at all."

Somehow I didn't think there were. "He never left the farm. My mother never told me why. Do you know?"

"Oh, it's no secret. Many years ago he gave a lift to a young girl who lived in town. She accused him of molesting her. He denied it vehemently, but you know how people are inclined to think the worst of anyone. He was arrested, but it never went to trial because the girl finally admitted she'd made up the story to justify getting home late. Ralph was a proud man. As far as he was concerned, his word was his bond, and if he said he was innocent, he expected the people who knew him to believe it. The only ones who did were the Wellenses. So he marched into church one Sunday and told the assembled worshippers that the next time he'd speak to any of them would be in Hell because he certainly didn't intend to do so in this life. He said he'd never again leave the farm, and if any of them showed up, he'd shoot them and that included the sor-

ry excuse for a minister, whose homily one morning had been how we should all control our basic lustful instincts. You may have noticed a bit of coldness today on the part of the good reverend. Some men of the cloth are no more inclined to forgive than the rest of us."

At the motel I stepped from the car, leaned down, and said, "Name the time."

"How about ten tomorrow morning?"

Deep in my head, bells rang, lights flashed, and the word "tilt" appeared. What he should have said was—there's no rush at all.

Some things impress themselves on a seven-year-old mind. The route to the farm was one.

The countryside that flowed by was studded now with clusters of new homes—peaked, gabled, sided with vinyl, glassed, decked—where once, if a crop could grow there and be sold at a profit, it was cultivated. I imagined that from high above those varicolored houses would appear like a strange fungus creeping out from the town and devouring the green valleys.

The farmhouse, barn, machinery shed, and poultry house were painted white and gleaming in the sun at the foot of a gravel access road curling down

from the highway that ran by halfway up the hill. Nothing had changed there.

I toured the silent, deserted outbuildings. Everything as neat as a pin and in first-class shape. Family trait.

No rocker or swing on the porch, so I settled at the head of the steps remembering sitting there as a boy, looking down the valley and wondering why everything close was so green while the far hills were a hazy blue.

Aside from what I recognized as half-grown corn, I had no idea what other crops Ralph had been raising in the green and golden fields stretching away from the house. After I sold, the bulldozers would destroy them all, to the chagrin of whatever ghosts of my maternal ancestors might be watching. They considered wasting food a crime.

They'd crossed the mountains with an axe over one shoulder and a Kentucky rifle over the other, cleared the land, fought for it, bled for it, died on it and for it. Two had shed more than their share at Gettysburg, which wasn't that far away, under a July sun that was still as hard as brass and lay on the shoulders like a weight. Now it had come down to me, the last of the line, and I didn't want it.

A pickup came down the access road and pulled up behind

my rental. Tom Wellens had changed into jeans, a white T-shirt, and a gimme baseball cap. He appeared scrawny, but those corded arms would have the tensile strength of steel wire. He joined me on the steps.

"Would have bet you wouldn't show, but Ralph said you would. He'll be here to bury me, he said, because my sister would have raised him right."

"Don't know how a man who didn't come to *her* funeral could be so sure."

"Couldn't come. Laid up. Slipped off the harvester last fall and hurt his hip. Never did come around properly. Did the best he could, but—" he waved at the fields "—none of that would be there without my help. 'Course, we already had a pretty good working arrangement. One man can't do it all, and help is hard to find."

"About that hip. He could have let me know."

"Told him that. Most hard-headed man I ever knew. Wouldn't listen. Said you'd have enough brains to know that if he could have come, he would."

"How could he possibly know that?"

"Your mother's letters. Proud of you, Ralph was, all those honors you took in college and how well you did afterward. Said it was about time the family produced someone with brains." He

chuckled. "Thought it was because of that nonsense that he never left the farm, did you?"

"Nonsense?"

He took off his cap and ran a finger along the sweatband. "Nonsense. Kept it up just to remind those good churchgoers not to judge lest they be judged. They became so used to seeing my wife doing his shopping for him it never occurred to them to think otherwise. 'Course he left the farm, but not so they'd notice. Wasn't crazy, you know. Didn't live here like a monk. Good man, Ralph. Too stubborn and high-principled, that's all."

I let my imagination tell me what "didn't live here like a monk" meant.

"These revelations are overwhelming," I said dryly. "Have any more?"

"Want you to sell, do they?"

"Meisser seems sure I will."

He replaced the cap and leaned forward, squinting down the valley. "Knew Ralph never would, so they had to do something, didn't they?"

I stared at him. "What in the hell are you getting at, Mr. Wellens?"

"Told you I found him in his bed, didn't they? Just another worn-down old farmer whose heart gave out. Let me tell you something. You'll find one of those recliners inside. Big soft one. Cost him six hundred dol-

lars. Said it was worth every penny because that was the only way he could sleep without pain after he hurt his hip. He never used the bed. But only I knew that. A bit suspicious, don't you think?"

When someone hints of murder, you either blurt out, "That's crazy," or you're stunned speechless. I was stunned speechless.

"The way I figure it," he said, "they gave him something to make it look like a heart attack, then put him in that bed so everyone would think he died peacefully. No problem getting away with it if no one suspects."

I found my voice. A croak, but intelligible. "That makes no sense. They could have left him on the floor. Or in the recliner. No one would have given it a second thought."

"Sometimes people are too smart for their own good. Man is supposed to die in bed, you put him in it. How could they know he never used it?"

Unchecked assumptions have blown many otherwise foolproof schemes sky high. I felt a chill.

"Did you mention this to anyone? The doctor? The county sheriff?"

"Think they'd have listened?"

Hell no, I thought. They'd have put him down as a crazy old coot.

"So why tell me? Nothing I can do now, is there?"

"You're his nephew," he said, as if that answered all questions. "He was very proud of you, the things your mother told him. He'd have left everything to you, but he said you'd know damned-all about farming so it was best that I took the stock and the machinery, but you'd know what to do about the land. I dunno. Must have suspected something would happen. Day before he died, he told me you were to look in your secret place when you showed up."

"My secret place?"

He shrugged. "Somewhere you used to hide things when you came to visit as a kid."

Secret place? After thirty years, I was supposed to remember a *secret place* where I'd hidden things as an imaginative kid?

I rose and dusted off the seat of my slacks. To hell with it. Wellens' brains had probably been addled from being out in the sun too much. Hadn't done Uncle Ralph's much good, either. Not that I was in a position to criticize. Mine hadn't been working like a computer chip lately, which made the three of us no different from the rest of the country. Everyone is a little nuts.

"Mr. Wellens, I'm going to keep my mouth shut, get as

much as I can for this place, and take off for somewhere far away."

He walked down the steps, turned, and gave me a knowing grin. "Yeah, sure you are."

I unlocked the door and stepped thirty years into the past. Living alone, Uncle Ralph had no reason to change a thing. The furnishings, from the sofa to the curtains and the lamps in the living room, were exactly as I remembered. So were the oak table, chairs, sideboard, and china closet in the dining room, all waiting to be snapped up by an eager used-furniture dealer. He must have had Mrs. Wellens in to clean once in a while. Not a spot of dust anywhere. Another family trait.

I had no doubt that the bedrooms upstairs harbored a few antiques. I should do well on the house contents alone.

He'd redone the kitchen, though. Everything from the sink to the microwave to the tiled floor was new.

Seemed much smaller than I remembered. Then I realized why.

He'd converted most of the big, old fashioned, farmhouse kitchen, along with the walk-in pantry and house-wide back porch into a two-room apartment suitable for a bachelor. Bedroom and bath in one; den in the other.

I couldn't help grinning. Why climb stairs if you don't have to? Now I knew where my pragmatism came from.

A desk and pair of filing cabinets in one corner of the den served as an office. Farming, after all, was a business that required record-keeping, like any other. The recliner Wellens had mentioned stood opposite, facing a nineteen-inch television set on a stand, a VCR below it. No moss on Uncle Ralph. I couldn't help but feel that if he'd lived a bit longer he'd have bought a computer.

I lowered myself into the recliner and leaned back, sinking into its fabric-covered softness. Easy to understand why he preferred it to his bed. The small table alongside held a reading lamp and a compact AM-FM clock radio. Used when he found nothing of interest on TV, I supposed, or to listen to farm and weather reports.

Against the wall just beyond the table was a shallow bookcase holding small magazines. Four rows of them. I straightened, stretched, and pulled out the first one.

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, April 1968.

He must have continually renewed the subscription and saved every copy. Obviously he liked mysteries, yet the shelves held no novels, not even paper-

backs. Now that was a mystery in itself. There were, after all, some very good ones out there.

I replaced the book, sank back into the recliner, closed my eyes, and wondered why a hard-working farmer would confine his reading to short stories. Half dozing, I came up with what might be the answer—if I assumed he and I were very much alike, which wasn't a great assumption at all.

In the evening he could sit here and finish a short story with no difficulty even as his eyes grew heavy; all there, characters, plot, conclusion taken in one bite. With some novels he'd be up against what I'd found. Names would appear, unfamiliar until I realized the character had been introduced thirty pages and three days earlier. References to previous occurrences would make me wonder when did that happen? And sometimes my eyes would drift shut before I reached the end of a chapter or marked the page, and I'd start the next night with where the hell was I?

Half smiling, I thought that Uncle Ralph and I would have gotten along real well. Genes are genes. Our minds traveled the same roads.

And then I straightened the recliner with a crash, walked into the dining room, and crawled beneath the table.

It was big and square with a massive center pedestal, designed to take extra leaves so it could be expanded to seat eight. The leaves were stored above the pedestal, leaving a space of about two inches where a boy could hide all sorts of good things from the eyes of grown-ups.

My secret place.

I thrust my hand into it, found smooth plastic, and pulled out a miniature tape recorder, easily slipped into a shirt pocket.

Kneeling there, I slid the small switch to Play.

The sound of a door closing, and then, "Been thinking the offer over, Ralph?"

"No thought necessary."

"Now, Ralph, I told you we have a schedule to meet. A lot of big people, important people, are involved here and they're getting impatient. Not like you're being cheated or anything. I've been your lawyer for a long time, and I wouldn't let them do that. You're getting a fair price. You can go live anywhere, take it easy."

"Something you don't know. This hip of mine, now. Poking around in there, they found a cancer they can't do anything about. One of the wild, fast-growing kind. I'll be gone in six months, so there's no reason for me to take all that money, is there? If you don't mind, I'll end

my days here. Now, if that inconveniences your powerful friends, well, that's the way it's got to be. I'm not selling. Not what I want."

"I'm sorry to hear about the cancer. Really I am. All the more reason for you to take the money. Buy you an awful lot of good care you'll be needing."

"Prefer to die where I was born."

A sigh and menace in the voice. "That could happen sooner than you think."

A chuckle. "Then you'd have to deal with my nephew. He could be more hardnosed than me."

"C'mon, Ralph. We looked him up. Wife took off and left him broke, and he lost his job. He'll grab the money and run."

Absolutely correct.

"Best thing you can do for him is take the money. You'll leave him more than he'll get from us. He's a loser."

Insult me if you like, but pay me first.

"Good reason for you to back off and let me die in peace, isn't it? Tell you what. I'll sign if they promise to work around me."

Scrape of a chair being pushed back. "Can't be done. Commitments have been made and contracts signed. I'll bring the papers tomorrow night. And a couple of friends. I hope you change your mind by then. Understand, I don't have any choice.

I'm just a big frog in a little pond and do what I'm told."

"No point to trying to scare me."

"Not trying to, Ralph. I'm saying they won't wait to deal with your nephew six months down the road. They'll say if that's the way it has to be, do it now."

"Then I wish them luck, Meisser. I always said that kid had a harder head than mine."

The sound of a door closing. My thumb was on the off switch when my name stopped me. Ralph's voice.

"Sanford, the only way you'll be listening to this is if I've joined your mother in some heavenly choir sooner than I wanted to. She ever tell you we had the best voices in the valley? I really don't know why they want the farm so bad, but then I haven't studied on it, having more important things on my mind. They offered a million dollars, but hell, money means nothing to a dying man. Time does. Don't understand why they refuse to give me my six months. One reason I wanted them was to get together with you. But if Meisser robs me of them tomorrow, you do what you think best. If you just want to take the money and go, that's all right. I haven't been much of an uncle, so you really don't owe me a thing. I just hate to see them get away with something. Sorry we

never got together, but the years, well, they really slip away, don't they? My fault, but I want you to know you were never out of my thoughts."

The recorder hummed.

I rose, pulled out a chair, placed the recorder on the table and sat staring at it, elbows propped, head in my hands, digesting what I'd heard.

No one could argue with what was on the tape. Meisser's words might not be sufficient in a court of law perhaps, but they were clear enough. He and his friends were on a schedule that couldn't wait six months for Ralph to die, so they'd hurried him along. Since he was going to die anyway, he hadn't put up too much of a struggle.

I couldn't see that a six month delay would make any difference to another housing development. Something bigger had to be involved, particularly in view of the million dollars. Like a mall or an industrial park.

I'd always considered myself easy to get along with. I'd been taught that I was never right a hundred percent of the time but neither was anyone else. Try hard enough and you could always find a middle ground. Schedule or no schedule, something could have been worked out so that Ralph could have died the way he'd wanted to. All it would have taken was a little

understanding and compassion, which Meisser and his friends seemed to lack.

No fool, Ralph. Anything he could have written or said to me would have made him sound like a paranoid old man. Reading all those mystery stories, he'd have come across every plot, ploy, and scheme to turn the tables on the villain that any clever author had ever thought of, so he'd adapted one to let me know what went on. He'd made the recording so that I could hear for myself, and hidden it where only I would find it when I showed up to bury him. But I had no real evidence and no way to get any. Even if I could use that recording somehow to have the body exhumed, I could still prove nothing.

I'd also been taught that you never turn your back on a friend, which was what Meisser obviously had done, probably for money. He should have known better. A man who had marched into church and told off the entire congregation and the minister because they'd turned their backs on him would somehow make sure he had the last word.

Ralph was right when he'd said I didn't owe him a thing. He'd simply thrown the ball to me. My choice to run with it or toss it over my shoulder and walk off the field with a million

in my pocket. No question I could get them up to the figure they'd offered him.

Head in my hands, I sat there in that silent farmhouse, alone but for generations of ghosts pressing in on me and waiting to pass judgment on the last of the line.

Nothing I wanted more than to throw my head back and yell, *"Hell no! I won't do it! I'm taking the money and getting out!"*

But I couldn't, and I knew damned well I couldn't.

Oh, I'd take the money, all right. We were proud, not stupid. But it wouldn't end there.

The product of a matriarchal lineage where strong women had always set the standards and made the rules, sly old Ralph had known I wouldn't ignore those ghosts. My mother would have raised me right, he'd told Wellens.

I'd grown up hearing her say, *"We don't permit anyone to tromp on us, dear. We always balance the books."*

She'd have understood but not approved the drastic way I'd balanced mine, but since I was the aggrieved party, it was my choice. Being unemployed, I'd had plenty of time to work it out so that the police questioned me only once after my ex-wife disappeared. I'd had to improvise, of course, since I had no money,

but fortunately alligators don't ask for payment.

Nor would my mother approve of how I'd eventually balance the books for tromped-upon Uncle Ralph. A million dollars would give me plenty of time to work that one out, too.

I might get Meisser to visit me in Florida next winter. No reason for him to refuse a free vaca-

tion in the Sunshine State. He had no idea I knew what he'd done to Ralph.

My ex-wife had been on the thin side—a diet dish, you might say. Meisser now . . . the alligators would consider him more like a really good piece of prime rib.

No point in spending money if it isn't necessary.

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Final Answers

C. M. Caterer

I must be the only person on earth, short of mothers with school-age kids, who dreads the summertime. I take walks on the bluffs of Lighthouse Point, which is the highest spot on the island of Garth's Reach, and sigh a little as the spring sun starts to warm my bones. I look out across the Reach towards Massachusetts and wonder what kind of trouble the island will stir up for me this year.

By the end of May I'm pretty much resigned to sheriffing another summer on this rock, but last year I got acclimated even quicker than usual, since the last night of May was as thick and hot as August. That night I was dozing on the sofa in my tiny living room, a copy of *New England Game & Fish* flopped on my chest, dreaming about a pneumatic drill. When the telephone jangled me out of my sleep, I realized the drill had been my own snore.

"Yeah? MacReady here."

"Geez, Mac, you can sleep through anything. It's rung ten times already."

"For crying out loud, Riley, it's

Saturday night. This better be good."

"You said I could call anytime with an emergency." My deputy cleared his barely postpubescent throat to get my attention. "We got a hit and run on Seaside Way, just north of St. Patrick Road."

"You called me at two A.M. for a car wreck?"

"No wreck," said Riley. "Fatality. A pedestrian."

"Who is the pedestrian?"

"Lauren Boyd. You know her? She lived with her folks on St. Pat's."

My heart gave a little squeeze, and the heat in my box of a house crept in closer. Brian Boyd had been a high school friend of mine, though we hadn't been that close for a number of years. Briefly I remembered attending Lauren's christening some twenty years back. "Yeah," I said finally. "I know them."

"I'd just finished a last patrol around the west side of the island about an hour ago, and I stopped for a tonic. I was going straight back to the office, but I thought I'd take a last drive up St. Pat to Seaside and there she

was, about a quarter mile from the intersection."

"So that was when?"

"Just now. I'm still at the scene."

"Okay," I said, rubbing my eyes. "Stick around till I get there. I'll be five minutes tops."

"Right."

I hung up the phone and stared at its cradle on the wall for a minute. A ten-year-old blob of grease decorates the peeling wallpaper in that corner. I've stared at that stain more than a few times and wondered if a wife would've insisted the wallpaper be replaced with something cleaner and brighter. Or if a child might have tacked up a crayon drawing to cover the grease. Now, picturing myself trying to break the news to Brian about his daughter, I was glad to be alone in the world.

The ambulance had arrived by the time I drove up the road to Seaside, which runs along the east coast of the island.

"You're sure she was hit?" I asked as Riley walked up to meet me. We blinked in the glare of the ambulance headlights.

"Yeah, Mac," he said.

I grunted. It's not that I don't trust Riley—not exactly—but he jumps to conclusions too quickly sometimes. I glanced over at Roy Hodges, the coroner, who

nodded his confirmation. I limped over to the ditch on the west side of Seaside Way where Lauren's body lay.

"Spine's broken," Hodges told me. "She got hit from behind and thrown into the ditch."

"You're sure about that?"

Roy nodded, giving me his don't-second-guess-me look.

"Mac! Over here." Riley gestured with his high-powered flashlight and led me to the guardrail on the other side of the road. The car had dented it, leaving a streak of blue paint.

"You try to collect any of that paint?"

"Got it right here." He patted his pocket. "Oh, and get a load of this." He pointed the beam at the middle of the road. Glass sparkled like diamonds on the pavement. "Busted headlight, right?"

I squatted down with some difficulty but kept the groans to myself. "Yeah. Looks like only one."

Riley bobbed his blackhaired head. "That's just what I thought. All we gotta do is find the car with one busted headlight."

"If it isn't gone on the morning ferry."

"Aw, Mac, can't we check the cars that go out?"

"That's a lot of cars. You're going to hold up the ferry for an

hour or more checking every one."

"Can't I, Mac? I'll do it all myself."

"And are you going to check each one all day long? There's a boat every hour, for crying out loud."

My deputy's face fell like a shamed dog's. "Seems like we gotta do something."

A breeze gusted at us suddenly from the harbor and cooled my forehead as I straightened up. It's not that Riley's idea was a bad one, but I wondered if it wasn't a little too perfect, that streak of blue paint and the broken headlight. I was surprised the license plate hadn't been dropped next to Lauren Boyd's body.

"Okay," I sighed. "Tell you what. Go down to the docks first thing in the morning and talk to the ferrymen. I don't want you checking every car; you just supervise, understand? Let them know what to look out for—blue car with a broken headlight."

"Right! Hey, maybe I can get a better I.D. with this paint, you think?" In his head he was already shipping the paint scraps off to the Boston lab.

"Sure."

He jumped back into the squad car and threw it into gear, gunning it until its lazy body roared into life. The ambulance drove away a bit more quietly,

and I was left there on Seaside with my ten-year-old Chevy. I could just hear the lapping of the waves against the rocks below, though it was too dark to see them. After a moment I eased into my car and drove back down Seaside Way.

The day was already steaming by ten that morning. I limped into the office, the humidity hitting my bad leg worse than usual, my whole body sore from lack of sleep. The secretary glanced up and sniffed at me. "About time you decided to come to work."

I grunted and poured myself a cup of her coffee. I coughed it down. "Dammit, Hillary, when are you going to start making some normal brew? I've told you before."

"It's French Hazelnut. I thought you'd like it."

"I like Folgers. I've told you."

"Well, who stuck the thorn in your paw this morning?"

"Nobody. Never mind. Where's Riley?"

"Down at the ferry docks. Such a shame about that Boyd girl."

I sighed and rubbed my eyes. I'd spent most of the night consoling Brian. "Yeah. I know. I'm going out for a while, I need to talk to some people."

"Talk to people?" Hillary

raised her graying eyebrows at me. "You don't think somebody did this on purpose, do you?"

"Doesn't matter if it was on purpose or not. But I got a feeling."

I poured the coffee into my travel cup and even managed to drink some with a smile to make up to Hillary. She humphed at me as I left the sheriff's office, but she didn't much mean it. She was just as interested as I was in finding out who would kill Lauren Boyd.

My gut feeling took me to the summer house of a boy named Cory Foster on Garth's Drive. The Fosters have owned a house on Garth's Reach about as long as Cory's been alive, which makes them honorary islanders in some people's eyes. Most of the year they live in Boston, where Cory's dad owns a controlling interest in one of the big publishing houses. I know them well enough to say hello—I know just about everybody on Garth's that well—but Riley had told me that Cory was Lauren's boyfriend, so that day I was all business.

A Their white colonial sits up on a rise set back from Garth's Drive with a full view of the Atlantic. The flagstone path ends early, and then it's all little stone steps up to a house fronted by a tidy row of irises and squared-off hedges. As I knocked on the

door, I heard the lapping of the pool out back and knew Mrs. Foster was doing her morning routine. They had a porch complete with an antique wooden swing and a trellis covered with yellow roses.

"Sheriff, well, isn't this a surprise," said Richard Foster as he opened the storm door. He swallowed a few times as he let me in. "I hope Cory hasn't been tearing up and down the drive again?"

"No, sir, but I would like to talk to him." I wiped my feet on the welcome mat. "I'm afraid I've got some bad news."

Mr. Foster's face whitened. "He's all right, isn't he? Cory? Cory!"

"He's fine as far as I know." I waited until Cory, a strong blond-haired kid in swim trunks and a towel, greeted us at the front door with a blank look.

"Here, sheriff, where are my manners? Please come in." Richard Foster swept his arm in front of me as if showing me a new car, and I sat down in the sunroom on the edge of a floral cushion. I wondered if my slacks were dusty.

"Hey, what's this all about?" Cory asked, following. His father shot him a bewildered glare.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you

both this, but Lauren Boyd has been killed."

I watched the reactions closely. Richard Foster's face stayed blank but was registering regret—as if he were wondering where he'd heard Lauren's name before. Did he know her? Did Cory? Then his memory kicked in, and he glanced at his son. —

The boy took a minute or two, at first frowning, then shaking his head, and finally looking up at me with the beginnings of tears in his eyes. "Lauren? What are you talking about?"

"She was found very early this morning on Seaside Way—apparently a hit and run. I'm real sorry, Cory."

"Lauren—" He turned away from me, his face in his hands.

I cleared my throat, giving him a minute. "You wouldn't know what she was doing out on that road so late, would you? Alone? Did you happen to see her at all yesterday?"

Cory's father stood up. "Now, just a minute, sheriff. Where are you going with this?"

I sighed. Foster was the type who always had a lawyer's number in his back pocket. "I'm trying to put together the girl's day if I can. Now, Cory, I gather you two were an item. Did you see her yesterday?"

"We had a swim and then

lunch over here." His face crumpled again.

"Okay, kid. I know, it's tough. Do you remember what time she came by here, and when she left?"

"Oh—I don't know." Suddenly Cory's shoulders slumped, and he took a few deep breaths. "I think I need a cup of coffee or something."

"Maybe you could do this later, sheriff," said Foster, walking to the door of the sunroom. "After Cory's had some time to absorb what's happened."

Or reconstruct it, I nearly said—but instead I just gave my sympathy smile and took my cue. Cory's dad stood at the storm door, frowning at me or the sun, I wasn't sure. I raised a hand to him and walked around to the drive, out of his sight. I'd nearly made it to my car when Mrs. Foster came down the flagstone path toweling her short dark hair.

"Everything all right, sheriff?" She was ten feet away, but somehow she managed to whisper so I could hear her. I stepped closer and glanced back at the house. It was closed tight, as if deserted.

"Not as good as I'd like it." I smiled briefly. Regina Foster had none of her husband's look of having slept on a bed of steel all night.

She gave me a warm smile.

"Did you get any coffee in there?"

"Can't say I did."

"Come on back to the pool and have a cup. Or juice, as hot as it is."

It wasn't time to be kicking back by the pool, but something—and it wasn't that smooth blue bathing suit, either—made me follow her.

"I wish this was a social call," I said, feeling a bit guilty.

"Take the shady chair. I know why you're here, I heard it all. Poor Lauren." She poured me a tall frosty glass of orange juice.

"I think I ruffled your husband's feathers."

"That's silly. You're just doing your job. And he's doing his—protecting his young." She pulled a cigarette from a pack on the table and then thought better of it, breaking it in two over the ashtray, which held more than a few even this early. "I do love Cory, sheriff—can't help it. But he's drifted so far from me. He's so much like Richard now it scares me." Her glance jerked back to mine as if she'd just awakened from a dream. "Not that it's bad, really—but different from how I thought he'd turn out."

I let that sit between us, sipping my juice. Then I said carefully, "Is Cory so different these days?"

"Oh—well. He's so absorbed in

his studies, that's all. He's so determined to get that degree, and he wants to go to Harvard for med school. He has to be absolutely the best in order to get there. I've tried to tell him to slow down, but he's got a big head, sheriff. Thinks he can do anything, and maybe he can."

"Can he?"

She laughed a little and coughed, as if her cigarette smoke had gone down wrong, except she wasn't smoking. "I think he was brought down a notch or two last semester. Lauren talked him into taking a poetry class she was enrolled in, and it nearly killed him. Oh, he got his A, somehow, but it was close. He called me up almost in tears at midterm." Her eyes went hazy, and she gazed out over the still water under the diving board. "When was the last time he called me up for help? But he wanted help then. I was an English major, you see, and somewhere in that egocentric mind of his he'd remembered that."

"Could you help him?"

She shrugged, smiling. "Not much. I tried to explain one of the poems he was reading, but he didn't want to talk about it, he just wanted quick answers. He thinks poetry is meaningless because you don't make money at it." She shook her head and crushed the unlit cigarette

against the side of the ashtray. "I almost wish he'd flunked that course. Just to show him he can't do everything, that some things are better left to different kinds of people. But he didn't. That's the kind of kid he is, sheriff—do or die, you know?"

I didn't know—not exactly—but I was beginning to. I smiled at her and finished my juice.

I picked up a dozen doughnuts from Daisy's Donut D-Lite, a new place that's opened up about a half block from the office. Daisy was bucking the island tradition of fish and natural foods, and in my opinion, it was about time somebody did. I held the box open to Hillary as I walked in.

She sniffed and took the pencil out of her mouth to make an erasure on the page in her typewriter. "No, thanks. *I'm* watching my weight."

"Suit yourself. Did Riley ever come back?"

"In here, Mac!" he called.

I grunted my way down the hall. My own office is in the back of the building for a reason, and it isn't open to visitors. "What're you doing in here?"

He turned around from the filing cabinet looking a bit less haggard than when I left him last night. His black hair was still wet, slicked back into a ponytail. At least it was neat.

"Sorry. I was checking the registrations to see who might have a blue car."

"Car registrations don't tell you the color," I snapped. "Could I get to my chair, please?"

He moved aside. "I'm just trying to follow up every lead."

"Did you shave this morning?"

"I was thinking of growing a beard. That girl I went out with last week, Cindy, she said—"

"Never mind what Cindy said. Make an effort to look decent for this office, you hear me? Whether I like it or not, you represent us." I threw myself into my chair, which gave an ominous squeak.

"Geez, Mac, I'm sorry."

I waved a hand at him and sighed. "Oh, forget it. I was up all night; that's not your fault. You find anything out at the docks?"

He shrugged, sitting down across the desk from me. "That car didn't leave this morning. And I checked around at the garages. Nobody's taken it in for repairs."

"Nobody will for a while, I'd guess, until this blows over. I need to talk to some of Lauren's friends and find out what she was doing last night. You know any of her pals?"

"She's been pretty tight with Cory Foster."

"And who else?"

Riley scratched his stubbled

chin. "I saw her on a double date a couple of weeks ago. Cory and his folks had just come in, right after he got out of school. It was Lauren and Cory and Dean Murphy and a new girl. Maybe one of his crowd from B.U."

"B.U. . . . what year is Cory now? Sophomore?"

"I think he'll be a senior this fall. Lauren was up there with him. So's Dean."

"Dean . . ."

"You know, from Dickenson Road. Tom Murphy's his dad."

"Right. Right." Tom was a ferryman. He'd been working the docks the last thirty years. I guessed I'd seen Dean before, but I couldn't picture him. They didn't seem the type to be friends with the Fosters, though. "Is Dean on scholarship?"

Riley snorted. "No way. I think he more like barely scrapes by. He probably has a couple of student loans. Plus I think he works on campus. He's not real hot on school—it's his dad that made him go. That's probably why he buddied up to Cory. That guy's a whiz—straight-A honor roll every semester, swim team, debate club, class secretary—"

"How do you know all that?"

Riley raised his black eyebrows and swiped a doughnut from my box on the desk. "I keep my ears open, Mac, like a

deputy's supposed to. I had a beer one night with Dean, and he told me all about it. Cory's pre-med."

"Pretty high-stress life, don't you think?"

"Maybe. All I know is Dean said Cory got him through molecular biology."

I picked up my hat and then, squinting out at the sun through the back window, replaced it. My hair was sticky and damp enough already. "Why don't you pay Dean a visit," I said. "Maybe he saw Lauren last night. Cory's being awfully vague, but it sounds like he didn't see her much after noon. I'm going to talk to Brian Boyd if he's able."

"And I should keep checking the docks?"

I sighed. "Yeah, yeah. Check the docks."

Riley stuffed another doughnut into his cheek. "I'm gonna catch this one, Mac. Just watch me."

"Oh, I'm watching you, all right," I said. "Every minute."

Brian Boyd's house was a far cry from the Fosters' so-called bungalow, just a modest saltbox ringed by low hedges and carpets of phlox. Even in the heat the door was shut and the shutters latched. I caught a chill standing in the sun in front of that lonely little house, and I

hated myself for knocking on the door. But I could see no way around it.

Karen answered, her face pale and thin without makeup. She said nothing but stepped aside for me to come in.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am," I began, but she hushed me with a finger to her lips.

"Really, Mac, that's all right." She pressed her thin lips together and led the way into the living room. No television, no children yelling back and forth, no music. Just the thick green drapes, hushed and drawn against the sun. It was like being in a library.

Karen had coffee in a thermos carafe sitting out on the coffee table. She poured me a cup without asking and handed it to me, black. Her eyes were ringed with circles and red, but dry. "I know you have to do your job," she said in a voice barely above a whisper. "And your job today is to find out who did this to my Lauren."

I laid a hand on her arm and felt it tremble. "Now, Karen, I'm going on the assumption that this was an accident. That means it could have been anyone."

"No one would want Lauren dead."

"Of course not. That's what I mean." I swallowed some coffee and set the cup down. "But just

to be sure, I need to try to put together Lauren's activities yesterday. I understand she saw Cory Foster—"

"Yes," said Karen. She pressed her hands together in her lap until the knuckles turned white. "She left here before lunch—maybe ten thirty or eleven."

"And she came back here later?"

"Around half past one, I would say. She helped me with some gardening and stayed around the house for the afternoon." Karen looked up at me. "I didn't like her seeing Cory."

"You didn't forbid her to, did you?"

"Oh no. I just didn't care for him all that much. They were fighting anyway, which is why I suppose she went over there yesterday morning. To patch things up."

I had an urge to take out my pencil and notebook, but it didn't seem appropriate. Instead I leaned forward to catch every soft word. "They were fighting about what?"

"I don't know. It's been going on ever since they came back from college." She gave a shrug that might have been a shudder. "Cory's so—intense, Mac. He's such a perfectionist. Lauren told me he got a B on a test last semester and couldn't stop obsessing over it."

I let that remark sit in the air.

I wished I had my pipe to fiddle with. Finally I said, "Karen, do you think Cory could hurt Lauren? Has he ever?"

Her hands crept around her shoulders as if fending off a chill. "Oh no, Mac. I didn't mean that. Lauren would tell me. She's not the type to put up with that kind of treatment. I don't like Cory, I've said that much—but he never hit Lauren. I'm sure of that."

"Did they see each other after dinner?"

"I don't know. She said she was going to Dean's house—Dean Murphy. Some friends were watching videos over there. She didn't mention Cory, but he and Dean are good friends, so I suppose he could've been there, too." She paused. "I didn't wait up. She said she'd be late, and I trusted her."

"What time did she leave?"

"Right after dinner—around seven."

Karen's eyes drifted away from mine, and her voice softened still further. "Lauren and I were very close, you know. But something was on her mind, some problem between them, that she wouldn't talk about. I tried to help her, but I never found out what it was." Her tired gaze flickered back to my own. "I guess now I never will."

As I pulled away from the

Boyd's house, the heat pressed in around me from all sides, despite the sun's having disappeared behind a thick patch of clouds. I fiddled with my vents even though I knew the air conditioner was busted. My breath came in heavy gasps, drawing in more water than air. I drove back to Seaside and put on my emergency lights. I limped over to the guardrail, gazing down at the water, which churned uneasily.

Lauren had been walking alone here the night before. A mile north was Dickenson Road, where Dean Murphy lived. Could she have walked home from his house alone? Seaside isn't a pedestrian's street—too winding, poorly lit at night. She would have stayed on the west side of the road, close to the grass, walking south. A car had come speeding down the drive behind her—maybe the driver was drunk—and, seeing her too late, hit her and skidded into the next lane, ramming the guardrail.

I gazed back at the dent in the guardrail and squatted down, cursing my knee. The only problem with the scenario I'd just drawn up was that the car that had made this dent wasn't driving south, but north—it was easy to tell from the angle that the metal was crushed in. I glanced back at the road, look-

ing for the snaky black tail of a skidmark. But all I saw were the sprinklings of glass on the pavement.

Riley straddled a chair and flashed a V for Victory sign at the bar. "Two Sam Adamses, Lil."

"And a clam roll," I added.

"Fish and chips for me," Riley told her. He grinned at me while we waited for the beers, and I grunted in return. I sure wasn't going to make a thing of it, but I'm the one who orders when we go to the Seahorse. I'm not even that sure Riley's legal. Lil hefted her considerable bulk around the bar and brought us the beers herself. She winked at me, and I managed a smile before turning back to my deputy.

"Get that dopey look off your face and tell me what happened with Dean Murphy," I said.

"Plenty." Riley hugged the chair. "He did see Lauren last night. That same little group rented a couple of movies, he said."

"That'd be Cory, Lauren, Dean, and . . ."

"Shirley Rettiger. That's Dean's girlfriend. She's staying at a house on Huckleberry Trail for a couple of weeks with her folks."

"Who was the last one to see Lauren?"

"Dean says Lauren left first, around eleven thirty. She didn't want to watch the second movie. Then Shirley decided she was tired, too, so a few minutes later Cory took her home."

"Did Lauren leave on foot?"

Riley's eager face fell. "Uh—I don't know. I guess so."

"You didn't ask? This whole damned thing is about a car, isn't it?"

"But, Mac, here's the clincher: *Dean's* the one who owns that banged-up blue Honda with the one broken headlight!" Riley beamed again, waiting for a pat on the head.

I didn't turn quite the number of cartwheels he was hoping for. "How did that come up?"

"I asked to look at his car. I was being real thorough, Mac, just like you always say. So we went back to the garage behind the house, and there it was, big as life. Headlight broken, the passenger side all crushed up—"

"Passenger side?"

"Yeah. 'Course he acted real surprised to see it."

I figured he had.

"But don't sweat it. I locked him up already. Hillary's keeping watch on him. I told you I was gonna catch this one. Lunch is on me." He crunched into a fish fillet. "Pretty good, huh?"

Pretty good, all right. All nice and neat and sewn up, like a picture done in cross-stitch. The

only problem I could see were all those loose threads hanging off the back of it.

Dean Murphy sat in one corner of the jail cell on the floor, his knees drawn up to his chin and his back against the wall. Above him hung a crayon picture of the ocean that Hillary's niece Melissa had drawn. The hamburger deluxe Hillary had brought him from the Burger Basket sat beside him, untouched.

Riley tailed me so close as I walked to the cell that he bumped into me when I turned around. "Don't you have a report to write up?" I asked.

"Come on, Mac, he's my prisoner."

"This is a sheriff's office, not a war zone. Beat it."

Riley dragged his feet back to his desk.

"I want to hear typing," I called after him as I let myself into the cell. Dean glanced up at me, pushing back his short black hair with one hand. "You want to stand up?"

He settled in closer to the ground. "I didn't kill her, sheriff. I swear."

I sat on the lower bunk near his end. "Your car did."

"Maybe so."

"What do you figure happened?"

He shrugged. "Someone must have stolen it. Had to."

"You didn't report it stolen."

"I didn't know. I drove it to the Video Mart and back around eight o'clock last night and parked it in our garage. That's the last time I saw it. Then I got up this morning and John arrested me."

I took my pipe out of my pocket, but I'd left my tobacco in my desk. I turned it around in my hands. "So someone stole it, killed Lauren Boyd, and returned it to your garage late last night or early this morning. All without your knowing."

Dean glanced at me bleakly.

"Anyone else have a set of keys?"

He shrugged. "Just my dad."

"Have you ever lent the car out to anyone? Someone who might have made a duplicate set?"

"Well, yeah—lots of people. Most of my friends have borrowed it one time or other. Plus it was my dad's car until last year, and he lent it to people. Some of the ferrymen don't have cars."

"Someone framed you, you're saying?"

Dean shrugged, turning his face to the wall.

I followed his gaze, not looking at him but at the crayon drawing. "Dean, just tell me

this. Did Lauren drive home from your house?"

"She doesn't have a car."

"So she didn't ask for a ride, just left your house to walk down that dark windy road a mile home by herself? Is that what you're telling me?"

"I don't know!" Dean exploded. "She walked home. She didn't want a ride. That doesn't make me a killer."

I let him cool a minute, then leaned in close to him. "Why didn't she get a ride, Dean? Was she angry at Cory? At the rest of you?"

"Just leave me alone. I don't want to talk any more." Dean turned his body to face the wall directly. From that position he said thickly, "I didn't have any reason to kill Lauren, sheriff. I liked her." He buried his face in his hands. "I liked her a lot."

For once, Riley had made himself useful instead of sulking. He hadn't typed up his report, but he did take a drive out to the Rettigers' rented house. Shirley Rettiger was in the midst of packing to go home. Lauren's death had spoiled her vacation, she said.

Riley caught up with me at Emily's Cove, near the marina. I sat watching the sailboats glide in to the dock, as if I hadn't watched them hundreds of times before.

"She knew Lauren and Cory at school, through Dean. Man, was she nervous talking to me. She didn't stop throwing clothes in the suitcase the whole time. Plus she wouldn't look at me."

"Who could blame her?" I chucked a rock into the water. The sun hung over the Reach behind a mass of storm clouds.

"I think she knows something, Mac. She's leaving tomorrow morning. The thing is, I can't see any reason anybody would want to kill Lauren on purpose. It had to be an accident, right?"

"Oh, I've got a feeling there's a good enough reason," I said.

"So what is it?"

I didn't answer him. The water around the docks, usually still and flat, had started to shift uneasily, knocking up against the pier. One quick cold breeze nipped me and then died back to the heat that hadn't lifted for days.

I didn't know why Lauren Boyd had been killed. But Dean Murphy's blue Honda had convinced me of one thing: Lauren's death had been no accident.

Huck's Bait & Tackle is tucked in a corner off Water Street, nowhere near Huck's Cove. It used to sit right near the foot of Bramble Road, which is where the cove is, but when the new marina opened, Bonnie

moved it where the business would be. I started down Bramble and then caught myself, turning back onto Water Street.

She tried to neaten it up when she moved the shop up to the marina, but the white-washed storefront and hand-painted sign didn't make much difference. Inside, the lures still hang on dirty pegboards, and the worms squirm in huge glass terrariums. The fishing caps and vests sit jumbled in a milk crate.

Bonnie herself wore a fishing cap decorated with about two dozen lures, her curly, sand-colored hair poking out from underneath. Here it was only June and she already had a darker tan than I'd ever get.

"Hey, Mac, you've been laying low," she said as I walked in. Her eyes crinkled when she smiled, but that didn't take away from their color, like the Reach sprinkled with sand.

"Yeah. I haven't been fishing in awhile."

"You haven't sold that leaky old bucket, have you?" She cracked open a diet something from her cooler and handed it to me.

"Who would buy it?"

"Got a point there." Bonnie pushed her hat up and wiped her forehead. "I'm sorry to hear about Lauren Boyd. Paige just told me."

"Was she pretty upset about it?"

"Well—more shocked, I guess, than upset. They were room-mates but not what I'd call best friends."

Before she'd finished speaking, a young woman pushed through the swinging door from the stockroom. Her hair was the color of Bonnie's but straight and long. She heaved a case of soft drinks onto the counter. "Mom, when are we getting some air conditioning in this place? I can't stand it any more. I don't know why I'm working here this summer. Talk about a frigging gyp. And aren't we ever gonna have dinner?"

"And here's Miss Sunshine now. Paige, you remember Sheriff MacReady."

"Yeah, right."

I tried to smile warmly. "Paige, could you and me chat a minute in the back room?"

"Anything to get out of here." She turned around and pushed her way back into the store-room. The door swung close to my nose, and Bonnie shrugged and gave me a three-fingered wave.

I pulled up a crate and upended it for a chair. Paige threw herself into the chair behind the desk and twirled in it, looking above the desk at the photo of her mom and a big tuna she'd caught.

"I'm sorry about your roommate," I offered.

The girl rolled her eyes at me like I'd dropped off Mars. "Come on, sheriff, I heard my mom talking before."

"Still, it can't be good news for you."

She shrugged. "Just 'cause I didn't like her doesn't mean I killed her."

"Trust me. You aren't even in the running."

"So?"

"You and Lauren ever talk about things there at school? Was she happy there, for instance?"

"I don't know. I guess as happy as anybody."

"She did all right in her classes?"

"She aced everything. It was disgusting." Paige's cheeks turned pink. "Sorry—that wasn't too nice, was it?"

"It's all right. Go on."

"I didn't *hate* her or anything. We just didn't have a whole lot in common. She was kind of a goody two-shoes. See, I figure it's like God's practical joke or something that we're roommates at all."

"Why's that?"

"'Cause we were like really good friends in high school. When we enrolled at B.U., we signed up for lots of the same classes. It was gonna be so cool, going to college together and

everything. But we had a big fight freshman year, and we never really made it up. And then junior year the dorm threw us together. Isn't that a killer?" Paige slapped a hand to her mouth. "Oh God. I didn't mean that, sheriff."

"That's all right. Happens to me all the time." I pretended to jot something in my notebook. "You mind telling me what your fight was about?"

"Hey, that was a long time ago—I didn't kill her!"

"No, I don't think you did. I'm just curious." I gazed at a tiny drop of sweat beading on her right temple. She dashed it away.

"She was going with this guy Derek Halsey. He was a real loser, everybody on campus knew him. But she wouldn't listen to me. Anyway, we were all in a history class together, a tough one. We had to do three papers and a huge cumulative midterm and final—all essay."

"What happened?"

"Derek wasn't gonna fail that class, he said, no way. Lauren was a good student and a really good writer. At first she just helped him with his stuff. She checked the grammar and everything, like she did for me. But then . . ." She stopped talking and shifted her weight, fiddling with the stapler on one corner of the desk.

"Then?"

"She wrote one of his papers. And most of his final—it was a take-home. She was the kind of person who could write like someone else. She even threw in some mistakes that he'd make. She got him a B when he should've flunked."

I scratched my neck and swatted what was probably an imaginary mosquito. "I'm not sure I follow this. You had a fight because Lauren's boyfriend didn't flunk history?"

Paige looked at me like I was in second grade. "No. We had a fight because she did it for him but she wouldn't help me at all. She said she only wanted to do it this once, that she hated doing it anyway. And I was supposed to be her best frigging friend!" She kicked the desk, and it boomed like a jail cell slamming shut.

"But that was a long time ago."

"Yeah, I guess," Paige sulked. "She was so freaked out about doing it that she was going to tell the dean about it. But Derek talked her out of it. She always said she shoulda told—even though it probably woulda got her expelled. *That's* the kind of crap that killed me about Lauren. She does something like that, and then she beats herself up about it. But not for me. No frigging way."

*

I didn't care to hear Riley hang a murder rap on Paige Earnshaw. I knew if I showed up back at the office he'd write up a warrant before I could get the whole story out of my mouth. Instead I pulled my Chevy past the cemetery up St. Patrick to Seaside and sat there with my windows rolled down, watching the water toss itself on the rocks. The clouds hung so low and dark over the sea they looked ready to suck it up like tonic through a straw. The ocean sensed it, too: it had turned a somber shade of gray and boiled and foamed even more restlessly than usual. My insides were just as uneasy. I rubbed my gimpy leg. It was talking loud, better than any weather forecaster. After a minute I reached Riley on the radio and told him where to meet me. I coaxed the car into reverse and pulled away towards the Boyds' house.

"Maybe if you told me what you were after, Mac, I could help you," Brian said as he led Riley and me back to Lauren's bedroom.

"Is this the machine she used at school?" I stopped in front of Lauren's desk, where a computer sat—the kind Riley's always pestering me to get for the sheriff's office.

"That's it."

Riley plopped himself down in front of it. "This is just what we need, Mac. Does this have a CD-ROM? We could listen to music while we're typing up reports."

"Just turn the damned thing on."

"Okay, okay." He hit a button, and the machine whirled to life. I watched as a string of words danced down the screen, about as intelligible as Sanskrit. *Main processor 80386; HIMEM: DOS XMS Driver, Version 2.77.* "Nah," Riley mumbled. "We'll need something more turbocharged than this baby."

"Will you get on with it?"

"Hang on. It takes a minute to warm up."

A few keystrokes later, Riley brought up a long list of names. "Those are the files she's got stored on the hard drive. See, these things are directories, like file drawers. She's got one for all her different classes, it looks like—history, biology—"

"Is there one for poetry?"

As Riley typed, the names of the files lit up. "This one looks like it—POETRY.303. There, that's all the files in that directory. Boy, they had to write a ton of stuff in that class."

I glanced over the new list he had on the screen. There were titles like PAPER.01, MID-TERM, and FINAL. "Hey look," Riley said. "She's got four finals

here. She must've revised it a lot."

"I don't think so. Show me that one." I pointed to the file called FINAL.CF. Riley did his voodoo, and up popped the paper as big as life—with Cory Foster's name typed in the upper right-hand corner.

"Hey, what's she—"

"Show me those other tests."

FINAL.DM—Dean Murphy. FINAL.SR—Shirley Rettiger. Riley gave a low whistle. "She must've made a lot of money."

"She didn't do it for money." I glanced up at Brian, whose face was blank in the blue flicker from the computer screen. "Did she?"

"She would have done anything for Cory," he said dully. "Even this."

"Maybe she just typed it in for him," Riley suggested.

"That's what he'll say. Shirley's the one to talk to—she's the only person who hasn't been dragged into this yet." I stood up and cocked an eye at the window. It was only seven o'clock, but the black clouds made it look more like nine.

"We're going now? What about dinner?"

"You go ahead and eat," I told my deputy. "I'm going now."

To be honest, I cast a thought or two on Riley sitting in the Seahorse Tavern wolfing down

his fish and chips, and my stomach rumbled. My lunch had been scanty. But near the north end of Seaside I pulled off to Huckleberry, where the Rettigers' rented house sat back among the reeds. I dragged my gimped-up knee to the front door, knowing my stomach was jumpy for more than just fish.

I rang two or three times, watching the wind start to toss the willow in their yard back and forth like a rubber toy. Finally a sleepy boy of about thirteen answered the door, his hair sticking up in all directions. "Is Shirley Rettiger here?" I asked him.

He shrugged, and I edged closer to the door as the first fat drops started to fall. "Not right now," he said. "She said she was goin' somewhere . . ." His eyes widened. "To see you, I think."

"She went to the sheriff's office?" This was going to be easier than I thought.

"Yeah, just a second ago. And then right after she left, that guy came over again and said something about catching her on the way."

The rain started to cold-soak my shoulders, but that wasn't what gave me the chill. "That guy? Who?"

"One of her friends. Cory somebody."

I didn't wait to thank the kid. I grabbed my bad knee with one

hand to brace it and limped down the grass hill to my car. Once inside, I revved it and backed out onto Huckleberry with a squeal.

Shirley would have to drive down Seaside Way to get to the sheriff's office, and she'd go slowly, if she was smart, in this weather. There along the eastern coast of Garth's Reach the turns come quick and sharp, and when the road is wet, you have to take your time to keep from ramming into the guard-rail—or from hitting a pedestrian.

Seaside was plenty wet by now, the rain bucketing down so that I could barely see three feet in front of my fender. It rattled on my roof like nails in a coffee can, and my tires careened over that blacktop like a water skier. But I couldn't slow down. I know that road like my own kitchen, and I had to hope Shirley did, too.

Finally two floating taillights appeared in front of me like red ghosts as the road straightened. Their driver knew that road all right. The lights blinked in and out between the sheets of rain as I fell farther behind. Then the rain cleared for a second, and a silver Mercedes solidified around the red lights. Encouraged by the break in the weather, the driver laid his pedal to the floor.

I hit the gas myself just as the rain thickened again, turning my windshield into a waterfall. The wipers were useless. Ahead, all I could see were the round red taillights, getting smaller in the distance, and then suddenly they moved to the left and pulled up alongside another pair of red lights. The car ahead was picking its way along nice and slow, negotiating the turns like someone who wasn't used to driving in heavy rain. The little Mercedes ahead of me picked up speed.

Now, I should know better than anyone that no passing is allowed on Seaside Way—it's too narrow and twisting—but that isn't why I speeded up, feeling my tires lose contact with the pavement. The little Mercedes had no intention of passing. It glided closer to the second car and, with a jolt, smacked into it, sending it skidding toward the steep ditch off the curb.

I turned on my siren, but the Mercedes was bent to its purpose now. Suddenly the rain slackened to a gentle soak, and I could clearly see the rivers racing down the tires of the two cars in front of me, one desperately trying to pull ahead, the other slamming into it. Finally the second car gave in, skidding sideways and rolling into the ditch, turning somersaults until

it righted itself with a tinkle of broken glass.

As I came up behind, the Mercedes skidded to a stop, too, and just as I'd suspected, Cory Foster jumped out of the car into the spattering rain and ran over to the car he'd just sabotaged.

"My God, is she all right?" He wrenched open the driver's door. Luckily Shirley Rettiger was driving her dad's 1979 Buick, and though the back of it was crushed in, she looked unharmed.

"Get away from me!" she screamed at Cory, and jumped out of the car. "Sheriff, he tried to kill me!"

"Hey, wait a minute, that's insane! I was trying to pass you, and my wheels slid in the water!"

"More than once, looked like." I slipped cuffs around Cory's wrists.

"Okay, I know it was illegal, but I wasn't trying to—"

"Like the way you weren't trying to kill Lauren Boyd the other night?"

Cory stared at me as the rain slid down my face: "You saw my car, sheriff. It's in perfect shape. I couldn't have done that."

"You didn't use your car. You stole Dean Murphy's car. See, the person who killed Lauren did it deliberately. He drove up behind her on the west side of the road, gunned the engine, hit

her, and kept going. Didn't even brake enough to leave skid-marks on the pavement. That's why it struck me funny that the guardrail was dented—as if somebody skidded to avoid Lauren and slid right into it. But instead this driver did a U-turn in the road—maybe to make sure she was dead—and then realized he ought to leave some identification. So he drove straight into the guardrail, left some paint scrapings, broke a headlight. Then he kept going up Seaside, left the car at Dean's house, and retrieved his own car—that is, your car, Cory."

"But—"

"And it's my guess that Miss Rettiger here was on her way to tell me that Lauren wrote all your tests for you—for you, and her, and Dean Murphy to boot."

"That's right! She did!" Shirley sputtered.

"Maybe she wrote yours," Cory shot back, "but she only typed mine. I wrote it myself."

"She was so crazy about you she not only agreed to write

your test but your friends', too. Just like she did a couple of years back. But this time the guilt got to her. She must have threatened to turn you all in if you didn't do it yourselves."

"So what makes you think Dean didn't kill her?"

I smiled, one hand on Cory's arm. "Because Dean didn't care that much. But you weren't about to let your picture-perfect college career go down in flames like that. Not Mr. Straight-A's-on-the-road-to-med-school. Come on, get in."

I had shut Cory Foster up for the moment, but I knew it wouldn't be for long. He'd hire himself an expensive suit to try his case, and then the suit would do all the talking. And I'd have to sit through something long and tiresome where they don't allow a fellow to draw on his pipe. But all that was okay with me: I was pretty sure my story would hold up longer than Cory's. And if I couldn't bring Brian his daughter back, at least I could do this much for him.

Secrets

Janice Law

My first and only failing grade in school came in sixth grade, when Miss Solway asked us to write a paragraph about a secret. Patty Tolliver set to work about a surprise birthday party for her dad. I could see "birthday party" and "hiding presents" and the rest of the story emerging in her big curling script. Eric Rodriguez printed something about fireworks in steeply angled lines. His letters grew smaller and messier as they approached the right edge of his paper, then swelled again into big, assertive words with each new line. Even Jon Hansem, the slowest kid in the class, was hard at work, but my mind refused to function. I sat sweating at my desk and turned in a blank page. At the end of the period Miss Solway called me up to her desk. She looked disappointed and asked if I was feeling all right. I said I was fine; I just didn't have any secrets worth writing about. Miss Solway was unconvinced: I was considered a good, even an imaginative, student.

"I just couldn't think of anything," I wailed, and though

Miss Solway was one of my favorite teachers, I added, "It was a dumb topic anyway." I was almost twelve years old; and I already knew that there are some secrets too big to tell, like the one about my mother and Mr. Conklin and what happened the July that I was ten years old.

That summer was hot, dreadfully, dreadfully hot. We should have been used to it after three years in Hartford, but we weren't. Days when the thermometer crept up into the eighties and then the nineties, my mother would wipe her face and say, "What I wouldn't give to be back in Ireland now. It was never imagined to be this hot in Ireland."

Of course other days Mother "wouldn't have had Ireland as a gift," as she'd say, not with my dad dead. "Not an honest day's work to be had. Nothing but pride, poetry, and ignorance. It's bad times here, but worse there. You remember that and work hard in school, my girl." I would promise, of course. I liked school and did well, even though I was in the public school and not with the sisters, who provided a real-

ly good education. But Catholic school was out of the question, an unimaginable luxury. Although Mother worked hard, cleaning at the motel and the restaurants, we still lived from week to week. Her pay was usually owed from the moment she got it, and we ate cereal or beans for supper most Wednesdays and Thursdays.

I don't suppose we'd have managed at all if it weren't for Mr. Conklin, our tyrant and savior, who was a distant relative of my late father. Mr. Conklin owned a triple-decker house near his "Irish pub." He also owned a motel and a snack shop at the shabby end of Park Street where the Puerto Rican section stopped and the Portuguese, new immigrants like ourselves, were moving in. Their children went to the big, frightening city schools—rough and full of black people, Mr. Conklin said—while we had the top apartment of his triple-decker just over the city line in an old Irish-Italian neighborhood. The schools in the suburb were much, much better Mr. Conklin said, as "they damn well should be, considering the taxes." Both the apartment and my admission to the local elementary school were the direct result of Mr. Conklin's intercession. It was understood that either could be withdrawn at a moment's notice.

Stout and redfaced with a pug nose and a loud, jovial voice, Joseph P. Conklin was a sentimental bully with unsettling moments of gaiety and kindness. He brought me a doll once—and occasionally chocolates for Mother—and he sang "Danny Boy" every St. Patrick's Day as the restaurant was closing. But even in his best moments I was leery of him. I hated it when he wanted me to sit on his knee and tell him how I was doing in school. Fortunately his interest was usually focused on his property: the restaurants, his triple-decker, and his motel. He hiked his profits and kept his costs down by employing illegal immigrants like Mother, for whom he had originally gotten a visitor's visa.

As relatives, Mother and I occupied a privileged position; we were given the apartment and protected from the school authorities. In exchange, Mr. Conklin paid Mother less than the minimum wage and visited every Saturday around five o'clock on his way to the restaurant. If it was nice weather, Mother would send me out on the big front porch of the triple-decker, where I would watch the traffic and try to spit on the drooping heads of the hydrangeas that flanked the front steps far below. If it was bad

weather; Mother would tell me to go down and see Annie on the first floor. Annie was a stooped, arthritic old lady with a close and cluttered apartment and a fat gray neutered cat. She was lonely for company and never minded my visits. We would sit companionably, watching her old black and white TV or crocheting until I heard Mr. Conklin's smart patent leather loafers descending the stairs. Then I would tell Annie I had to go to dinner.

Upstairs, Mother would set the table and lay out dishes without saying much. When we first came, she'd cried and talked to her saint and said Aileen—this was Mr. Conklin's wife, who'd had polio and was in a wheelchair—would put a stop to it; later on, she was flustered and ashamed; finally she was bitter. That was when she realized we were trapped. Mr. Conklin relied on that. "You're nobody," I heard him say to her once. "Nobody knows you're here. You're invisible and be damn glad you are or Immigration'll have you back on the blessed Old Sod before you can pack your bags."

Working in the restaurant and the motel and being visited by Mr. Conklin changed my Mother. She lost the prettiness I can see in her old photographs, and she lost the playfulness and

sweetness that she had when my dad was alive. She grew tired and silent and tough. I was not tough—not then and not for many years. That July I was still afraid of the dark people at the far end of the street and of the sirens and night noises and of Mr. Conklin, who held our lives in his clean, meaty hands.

Since Mother was out working during the day, I spent afternoons in the local park, where there was a pool, picnic tables, a playground, and an organized recreation program. Whenever the swim team or adults had the pool, the rec department supervisors encouraged us in messy arts and crafts and group singing. Eventually, some of us formed a chorus, and the plan was that we would sing for our parents and for the local convalescent home at the end of the summer.

Everything about the chorus was wonderful: the rehearsals under the maple trees during the hot afternoons, the schmaltzy songs like "It's a Small World" and "Frere Jacques," the giggling groups of gossipy, self-important little girls. The only difficulty came when the chorus voted to wear dresses for our concerts. I had a skirt for Mass, of course, but for the concerts a dress, preferably a pretty sundress, was essential, and for weeks I teased Mother and scoured the newspa-

per ads for sales. Finally she announced that she'd gotten some material. Secretly I would have preferred something from Caldor's or Ames, but the material she pulled out of the bag—light blue with small pink and yellow flowers—was soft and pretty.

"With a ruffle," I asked. "Can we have it with a ruffle?"

Mother smiled. I look at her pictures now and think how pretty she was, how very pretty before she grew tired and overworked and tough. Once she had liked nice clothes, been flirtatious, carefree, popular; she understood the importance of a ruffle. Mother started the dress early the next morning, before she went off on the bus to clean at the motel, and she finished it late the same week, after she came in from mopping up the snack bar. On Saturday morning, I found the dress waiting for me, a pinafore style with ruffles around the arm holes and two pockets on the skirt.

I put it on. It was not just a perfect fit but a perfect, transforming dress. I was undersized, bony and plain. In the dress, I seemed dainty; the effect was charming; I was enchanted.

"Take it off and hang it up," said Mother. "You'll have it dirty before the day's out. It has to be kept for good."

I hung the sundress up in our closet, but as soon as I came

back from the park, I ran to look at it, to stroke the ruffles and spread out the skirt. And when, just around four, the phone rang and Mother had to go out on an errand, I could not resist trying on my dress again.

I dragged a kitchen chair into the bathroom and climbed up to look in the mirror of the medicine cabinet. I was standing there admiring myself when I heard the knock on the door followed by the sound of a key turning in the lock.

"Are you home, Patsy?" Mr. Conklin was the only one who ever called my mother Patsy.

"Patsy?" I heard him walking softly through the living room and down the hall. For a fattish man he had a light tread.

I didn't want to see him, and if I hadn't been afraid of dirtying my dress, I'd have slipped under the bed. In my moment of hesitation he appeared in the doorway.

"Where's your mother?"

"She had to go to the store," I said.

"Don't you answer the door when someone knocks?"

I shook my head.

"Where are your manners?" he asked. "Who else visits you every Saturday?" Then he laughed. "But there'll be boys around soon enough," he said, looking at me more closely.

"Very pretty." He reached out and touched the ruffle. "I must be paying Patsy more than I thought."

I flinched away from him. "Mother made this for me," I said, almost in tears. His remark spoiled my happiness. I wished I'd never put on the dress; I wished Mother would come home; I wished he was dead.

"There there now," he said, hitching up his light summer pants and sitting down on the edge of the bed. "Who's your pal, eh? Who brought you that Barbie doll?"

I bit my lip and didn't answer.

He ran his finger along the ruffle again, then smoothed the front of my dress. "I don't have a little girl of my own, you know," he said. "Wouldn't have been as pretty as you anyway. Your mother now, there's a pretty woman. I met her on a visit to the Old Country. She wasn't much older than you, and she was one of the prettiest girls in Belfast; that's the truth."

He took my arm although I tried to ease away. "Come sit here for a minute," he said. His voice sounded different, soft and sort of sticky, like something Mother would say was "too sweet to be wholesome." "Since your mother is out."

"You called her," I said, frightened by sudden knowledge.

"You asked her to get something for the snack shop."

"Did I now? And me with a car and going out anyway as I always do on a Saturday evening? Would I do such a thing?"

"You called her," I said, stubborn despite my fear.

"You're a clever girl," he said, settling me on his lap. "Maybe we should send you to the sisters at St. Bridget's. Would you like that? Wear a nice little uniform, they do. Gray blazer," he said, running his hand down my dress again, "little maroon tie, little maroon and gray kilt, little gray kneesocks. Just to here. Wouldn't you like that? Lots of nice Irish boys and girls at St. Bridget's."

I stopped trying to squirm away from him. "I like my school," I said, "but I'd like St. Bridget's better."

He laughed. "I just bet you would. I just bet you would. Well, it depends if you're good." He was stroking my knee, and I both did and did not know what he meant. I'd heard a fair bit out on the porch on those warm evenings.

"We'd have to ask my mother," I said.

"Oh, your mother can't afford St. Bridget's. Never in this life! Don't imagine your mother can afford to send you to the sisters."

"My mother decides," I said.

He laughed. "Does she now?" I

could see the veins in the whites of his eyes; I could smell his aftershave, and something else, a raw, dangerous smell.

"I want to get down now," I said.

"Not yet," he said, sliding his meaty red fingers under my dress. "Not if you want to get to St. Bridget's."

A minute later I started to scream.

"Shhh," said Mr. Conklin, and when I didn't stop, he yelled, "Shut up, shut up, you little bitch!"

I wasn't tough like my mother. The scream wasn't under my control, it went echoing around my head and burned between my legs and poured out like blood from a wound. I couldn't stop, not even when he slapped me. The scream was so independent, so beyond my control, that at last it even frightened Mr. Conklin, who did up his pants and hurried down the hall and out the door.

Mother came home just minutes later. I was sitting on the bed. My dress was torn, and there was blood on my legs. Mother took one look at me, and her face went white. She wrapped her arms around me, cursing and sobbing at the same time. When she stopped, she said, "I'll fix that bastard. He'll never hurt you again." Taut with anger and pain, her face

was almost unrecognizable, and I was nearly as frightened of her as of Mr. Conklin. "I promise," she said. "As God is my witness."

"No," I said, "no!" I had an intimation of disaster, loss, some terrible punishment. Good or bad, Mr. Conklin was the chief power in our small universe.

"You'll see," Mother said. "I won't bear this." Then she sat back on her heels and looked at me. "It's got to be a secret. God forgive me, you've got to keep this a secret. The police would tell Immigration. Do you understand that? We can't tell anyone what that bastard did."

I nodded my head. I didn't want to tell anyone. I had no words for what had happened. "A secret," I said.

"A deep, dark secret," Mother said grimly.

Sometime after ten P.M. the next Friday Mr. Conklin died behind his fast food restaurant. A stab wound stopped his heart so suddenly that he was dead before he hit the pavement. The papers made much of the speed of his passing, and for years I carried an image of Mr. Conklin tumbled like a large, ungainly bird from the sky and dying in mid-fall.

That night my mother was late coming home from work. The city sounds made me nervous—the sudden shrieks and

erie lights of police cars, fire trucks, and ambulances, the accelerating hot rods with their booming radios, the hoarse, quarrelsome voices of men drifting back from the bars—and I was still awake at eleven o'clock when I heard her footsteps. I ran to unlock the door.

Mother's weary face was bloodless. "I'm sorry I'm so late, darling," she said. "I had to wait and lock up. Mr. Conklin didn't come back from making the night deposit."

"I hope he never comes back," I said.

Mother gave me a sharp look. "Be careful what you wish for," she said, then she went into the bedroom and began to pack our cases.

Mr. Conklin looked out at us from the morning paper. His picture made him seem younger and more benevolent than he ever looked in life. The accompanying story told us about his violent end. I was thrilled and horrified by his death, by the unlooked-for fame of one of our acquaintances. These were sensational and superficial emotions, but I was genuinely sorry and frightened about leaving our apartment.

"My job's gone," Mother explained. "We don't exist. There never were any papers, agreements."

I asked about school, about

the park chorus, our concerts; Mother looked me in the face and shook her head. I felt suspicion dawn in a shiver of anxiety that grew stronger when we caught the morning bus to Boston without saying goodbye to anyone, not even to Annie. Once in Boston, the MTA took us to the South End, where we started calling ourselves Malloy instead of O'Brien and quietly disappeared into the Irish community. We put down a security deposit on a shabby apartment, and a very distant relative of Mother's found her a job in a sweatshop sewing curtains.

That fall I attended a real urban school, where I learned to smoke and swear and became outwardly tough. Inside I was frightened of a lot of things, all related to secrets and to July: men, sex, sudden death, Immigration. Underneath were even deeper fears, more terrible because unacknowledged: the fear of guilt, police, and discovery; the fear, worst of all, of being separated from Mother, whose protection, I sensed, was both sure and terrible.

It was several years before I learned that my particular horrors were not unique. Fear and loss were the common experiences of my classmates, and the art of keeping secrets was so essential to our survival that, though we could not forget old

fears, we could push them down relentlessly. I put away my suspicions and learned to live with ambiguity. When I graduated from high school, I joined the army, where I became a citizen and trained as a nurse. Amid the suffering of others I at last grew really tough, tough enough to ask Mother the question that had haunted my youth.

It was on another summer day, and tough or not, I would probably not have dared ask if we hadn't gone to Hartford. I had to attend a lecture at the medical center, and Mother said she'd ride along and visit a friend who lived nearby in Farmington. When I picked her up after the program, she suggested driving down to Park Street to see the old triple-decker. At once my childish fears returned. I stopped in the parking lot and looked at her.

"If it's not out of the way," said Mother, handsome in her dark navy dress. For years she had worn only dark colors, black, navy, deep purple, somber shades that gave her a vaguely European air. The rich ladies who patronized the bridal salon where Mother worked thought her taste distinguished and sophisticated.

I shook my head. "Is it wise?" I asked.

Mother gave nothing away.

"Who do you think will notice us?" she answered.

Of course she was right. I parked near the house, and Mother got out on the sidewalk and looked up at the big solid building with the flaring eaves and the prowlike porches. Blue-gray vinyl siding covered the dark wood shingles, and Mother approved. "Saves the painting," she said. "Clean-looking. Young Joe must be up on all the latest."

"Young Joe?"

"Mr. Conklin's son. He must be just a few years older than you are. Aileen's probably turned everything over to him by now. It was her money, part of it anyway. Her people owned some grocery stores, you know."

I did not know, and I thought Mother might say more about the Conklins, but she took a last look up at the apartment and got back into the car. "I've never been so hot as in that third floor flat," she said. "Remember how hot it used to get?"

"Yes," I said.

"Go on down Park," Mother said. "We might as well stop by the snack shop, too."

She spoke so casually that I felt guilty for all the years of suspicion and apprehension. Nonetheless, I drove downtown carefully, nervously alert for stop signs, traffic lights, and squad cars. Next to me, Mother

looked out the windows and remarked on changes in the neighborhood. The Portuguese shops had mostly gone, leaving a mix of Indian and Southeast Asian businesses: Bombay Foods, a Vietnamese market, shops that promised to speak Khmer, Vietnamese, Hindi, or Laotian. The old snack shop had been transformed into the New Thai Palace Restaurant, and Mother said, "Turn in. There's room for you to park."

I pulled next to a van labeled NEW THAI PALACE—RESTAURANT, CATERING, TAKEOUT and shut off the motor. The late spring evening was mild and pleasant. The sun turned the bricks of the restaurant to gold, and the sky was a peachy shade of pink. Mother stepped out of the car and walked around behind the restaurant where a big exhaust fan whirled out the smell of hot oil and spices. Beyond a brown board fence, children were shouting and playing, and, on the sidewalk two women in saris and dark sweaters pushed their children in strollers. Mother studied the restaurant, the garbage cans, the little open porch that led into the kitchen. Long ago Mr. Conklin had been seized by some swift and terrible force right at the foot of those steps.

For years I had wondered about the precise agent. Now

that I was on the verge of discovery, I found I'd rather not know. "Please let's go," I said.

Mother seemed surprised that I was nervous. She herself was perfectly composed, a fine looking woman somewhere in middle age, her hair still dark, her face only faintly lined, old hardships and weariness visible only in her eyes. The days of sweatshops and exploitation had eventually ended in Boston, where she had turned her toughness into such elegance that men admired her and were afraid of her. Six years ago she had married a brave one who owned a fancy funeral home and had become comfortable and happy.

"There is no danger," she said as she walked back to the car. "I told you that years ago."

I remembered the hot apartment, panic, fear, and pain—and Mother's contorted mask-like face. "You said you'd fix Mr. Conklin."

"I wanted to comfort you," my mother said, looking at me calmly. "But people are different. You would have been happier not knowing. You lack the taste for vengeance. It is a shame you never went to the sisters. They would have approved."

"I would have suspected anyway," I said. "We packed right up and left."

Mother gave a slight shrug. "We'd have gone immediately in any case. Aileen hated me; she'd have had us out of the apartment before his funeral."

"I was terrified you'd be questioned," I said. "For years I worried that someone would come, that you'd be taken away, that somehow . . ."

"We didn't exist," said Mother. "If he told me that once, he told me a hundred times."

"But the knife, the fingerprints, the other workers? There must have been evidence. Look at this place—where was there to hide anything?"

Mother got back in the car and fastened her seatbelt before answering. "I didn't have a plan," she said. "I've been told that makes a difference, not planning I mean. I don't even know all that was in my mind when I went out the door after him. It was around ten fifteen. He was going to the night deposit, but first he stepped out for a smoke—one of those vile cigars. There was a boning knife on the counter, sharp as a razor. I picked it up because I wanted him to know I was serious. I was desperate and hot and sick, and my heart was breaking. He'd gone too far. I wanted to tell him that he was never, ever to touch either of us again."

"What did he say?"

Mother's face grew dark and

reflective. "He laughed," she said. "He had trampled my heart; he had hurt the one person I had left, my only treasure, and still he laughed—you see what it is to be rich and powerful. Then he said that I was looking older, and I understood everything. We were nothing to him, nothing at all, and he was thinking of you for a replacement."

"I was ten years old," I said in a small voice.

"There was really nothing else to do," Mother said. "I was surprised he took such a long time to fall."

I imagined the night parking lot with the moths swirling around the security lights, the long shadows, the urban smells of hot asphalt, exhaust, and garbage cans, and my mother, young then and frightened, standing by the stair with a knife in her hand.

"Everyone thought it was a robbery," I said.

"So it was: the day's takings from two restaurants," Mother said with a slight smile. "The police blamed the gangs, the Puerto Ricans, wild kids from the project. What else could they do? He'd managed very carefully, and very few people knew me."

"But the knife?" I asked.

"What about the knife?"

"You don't know restaurants,"

she said. "Restaurants are full of knives. I rinsed off the boning knife in the sink and threw it in the dishwasher. As far as I was thinking at all, I figured the staff would unload it the next morning and put it back in the rack as usual."

"Of course," I said. I realized that my brave and decisive mother was untouched by fantasy. While I had been tormented for years by fears of discovery and loss and guilt, failure had never crossed her mind. She was a woman without imagination. "But didn't he have a wallet? Didn't he used to carry something for the money?"

Mother opened her pocketbook and pulled out a battered green leather zippered purse

that I'd seen a thousand times without recognition. "No matter where you discard things, they're apt to be found," she said calmly.

I was dazzled by the simplicity of her strategy, which had required only nerve and silence. Until now. I could not decide whether her guilty secret had finally and irresistibly resurfaced—as guilty secrets are supposed to do—or whether she felt a satisfaction that demanded recognition. I realized uneasily that the parish gentlemen who admired and feared my mother were right. Life had made her desperate, and then it had made her remarkable. Mr. Conklin had been hit by a force quite out of his reckoning.

The Trouble on Brown Island

William T. Lowe

The water was icy. Dale Whitetree shivered as he clung to one of the floating blue drums at the side of the trout pen. He was painfully out of condition for swimming underwater. But if he was going to find the guns, he would have to search the bottom, and the water here was ten feet deep.

"You really think they threw those machine guns in here?" he had asked Barney Watt, the ATF agent.

The older man nodded. "Be a great place to hide something," he said, "under ten thousand fish."

A steady breeze ruffled the water; they couldn't see the bottom from where they stood on the catwalk. And time was short. If guns were here, the smugglers could be on their way across the St. Lawrence, coming back to the island at this very minute. Brown Island belonged to the Akwesasne Mohawks; it had to be protected.

"I'll take a look," Dale had said. He stripped to his shorts and dived in.

He filled his lungs and swam down. The water stung his eyes—he wished there had been at least time to get a face mask. Dimly he could make out clumps of weeds and large stones. His foot struck the bottom and sent up a cloud of sediment, blinding him. He stroked up to the surface, panting.

He moved a few feet farther along the row of drums and tried again. This time he used the wire netting that was the side of the pen to pull himself down. A small trout looked at him curiously, then flicked its tail and darted away. Dale had seen perhaps a hundred trout hovering in the shadow of the catwalk, a tiny fraction of what had been here yesterday.

Had it been vandals who had cut the netting and allowed the fish to escape or smugglers trying to recover contraband intended for Canada?

He shot to the surface and shook his head at Barney and the other men watching from the dock. "Nothing yet."

Barney had told him the guns were probably packed two to a bundle. "They'll be wrapped in plastic; a little water wouldn't hurt." And

by now the current of the river would have covered the bundles with a fine silt.

Dale took a deep breath and pulled himself down again. This time he saw something, an irregular shape outlined against the bottom. He propelled himself toward it and touched it with his foot. It felt slippery and heavy. His lungs about to burst, he prodded the object with his hand, and it moved.

He surfaced, gasping. "Something down there. I need a rope." Ross threw him a coil of light line, a slip knot in one end to form a noose.

On his fourth try Dale managed to get the rope around what might be a bundle of the machine guns. His lungs rebelled before he reached the surface, and he swallowed a huge quantity of water. Ross helped him out on the catwalk, and he lay there, retching and panting, as Barney and Lee carefully pulled up the object he had found.

Less than two hours ago Dale had been sitting peacefully in his office in the tribe's new community building. The sign on his desk read ASSISTANT DIRECTOR. The sign was new—Dale had graduated from the state university in Potsdam, New York, in May.

Patsy, the division secretary, came in the door, a serious expression on her face. "Just got a message from Ross," she told him. "Tell Rory Horn there's trouble on Brown Island."

Horn was Dale's boss and director of the Mohawks' Environment Division. But Horn was out of town, in Washington for an EPA symposium; therefore any problem was Dale's problem, especially if it was on Brown Island.

Dale jumped to his feet. "I'll go see what's going on," he said. "Hold the fort, will you?"

"Lee Bassett will meet you at the dock in St. Regis," Patsy said.

"Corporal Lee Bassett? Are the police in on this?"

"Yes. They got the same message."

Dale left his office running.

Lee Bassett was several years older than Dale, but they both had the classic Mohawk profile, the strong nose, heavy chin, and thick black hair. Lee wore the midnight blue uniform of the St. Regis Mohawk Police.

"Too bad your boss is out of town," Lee said. "Brown Island is his baby, isn't it?"

"Right," Dale answered. But it's my baby today, he thought. "Let's take our boat," he said. "It's faster."

Ten minutes later they were running past the eastern end of Cornwall Island, the August sun burning away the morning mists. Ahead were the small channel islands scattered in the mighty St. Lawrence. One of these was Brown Island, the site of the Mohawks' fish farm, a project of the tribe's Environment Division.

The fish farm was an answer to the plague of pollution on the reservation.

For generations the Mohawks had existed by hunting and fishing and farming. Then came giant manufacturing plants on the west side of the reservation, dumping PCB's into the waterways, spewing contaminants into the air.

Within a few years the Raquette and St. Regis rivers on the reservation became dangerously polluted; fishing had to be banned. Under the supervision of the Environment Division, the tribe began raising rainbow trout. Rory Horn had secured a grant to finance the project; the work had been done by volunteers. This fall fresh clean fish would again be a part of the Mohawks' diet.

Now Dale could see Brown Island ahead. It was small, uninhabited, covered with pine and birch and a peculiar dusty fern that gave the island its name.

Here in the narrow inlet the fish farm had been constructed. Wire netting was suspended in the water from rows of watertight plastic drums. The enclosure was some thirty feet square, held in place by cables from trees on shore. The pond had been stocked with fingerling trout purchased from hatcheries in upstate New York. There were close to ten thousand fish; with daily feeding they would soon be large enough to harvest.

Inside the bay a dock and storage shed had been built along the shoreline. Dale brought his boat up alongside another boat tied up at the dock.

A tall Indian was waiting for them. Ross Talkstone was an elder of the tribe; he was as lean as a pine, with long grey hair held in place by a headband. Silently he pointed at the fish pen.

Dale gasped, not believing his eyes. Where there should have been a shimmering mass of silver fish the water was empty. The thousands of little trout were gone; only the rows of floating drums remained.

"What happened?" Dale asked.

"Come, I'll show you."

A floating catwalk reached from the dock to the holding pen. Oth-

er narrow catwalks extended across the pen for use in feeding the small fish.

Ross stepped out on a row of the drums. They bobbed and danced under his weight, but he kept his balance effortlessly. On the side of the square facing the river he stopped and pointed at a section of netting beneath him.

The wire had been cut from the surface almost to the bottom, allowing the fish to escape into the river. Ross had pulled the opening together again, lacing the edges with twine.

He led the way back to the dock. "I came to feed the fish as usual," he said. "Whoever did this must have heard my boat or seen me coming. He took off in his own boat. A white man, a small open boat.

"I saw fish streaming out of the cut he had made. I tied the netting together as best I could and sent my grandson in with the message." He paused, and Dale saw the anger on the older man's face. "I wish I could have caught that man."

"No idea who he was?" Lee asked quietly.

Ross shook his head. "Too far away."

"He left in a hurry all right," Lee said. "Forgot his hat." He pointed at a cheap cloth hat hanging on one of the pilings that supported the dock.

Dale barely heard him. He was thinking of the loss to the tribe that the damage had caused. The days of planning, the weeks of effort, now wasted. And it would be up to him to tell Rory the bad news.

"This is the worst case of vandalism I've ever heard of," he burst out angrily.

Lee was looking out at the river. "Maybe it isn't vandalism," he said slowly.

Dale and Ross stared at him. "What do you mean?"

Lee propped a foot on a bench by the shed. "You guys got any idea how much smuggling takes place on this part of the St. Lawrence? You know it's the boundary between New York and Canada."

"We know that, Lee," Dale answered. The river actually divided the Mohawk reservation: Hogansburg in New York and Cornwall in Canada. "What are you getting at?"

"The river is mighty big, and it's damned hard to patrol. Liquor and tobacco are the big ticket items going up into Canada; illegal aliens and counterfeit currency come south. Take my word for it, the contraband runs into millions. But the thing is, some of the parties in the smuggling business use little islands like this one as meeting places, or places to hide."

"I hear gunfire at night," Ross said quietly, "and I know it isn't duckhunters."

"You got that right," Lee said. "Some of these guys get greedy and hijack each other's cargoes. Or they try to outrun a customs patrol, which is usually a big mistake."

"So what?" Dale pointed at the netting. "Ruining our holding pen is still vandalism, no matter who did it. Look, I've got to get back to town. I've got to call Rory, and I ought to call Chief Solomon, and . . ."

Lee had turned away and was staring out at the river again. Dale realized he had been hearing the sound of a motor. He turned and saw a small boat rounding the point, heading for the dock.

"I know this fellow," Lee told them. "I called him on the radio when we got here. He can tell you better than I can what's going on."

The man who joined them on the dock was white, clean-shaven, dressed casually. He was in his late fifties and moved stiffly as he climbed out of his boat. Dale noticed he wore a belt radio similar to Lee's.

Lee made the introductions. "Dale Whitetree, Ross Talkstone, this is Barney Watt."

The man held out his hand, first to Ross, then to Dale. "*Sekon skenkenko wa*," he said.

In answer Ross made a traditional Mohawk sign of greeting. The white man had addressed them in the Mohawk language, and Dale was impressed. It was an uncommon gesture of respect.

Barney Watt surveyed the damaged netting. "I'm sorry about the loss of your stock," he said politely. To Lee he said, "It's a good thing you called me. We'd better talk."

They sat on benches by the shed. "Barney here is an agent with the ATF," Lee said. "He works with Canadian Customs."

"ATF," Ross said. "Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. What's that got to do with our fish?"

Barney leaned forward. "Most of the bigtime smuggling on the river is east of here, up toward Summertown, where they run big boats with big cargoes. But a certain group is using this part of the river to run firearms into Canada. You're out of the main traffic here, and this armament is small, easy to handle in small boats."

Dale shook his head. An ATF agent interested in what happened on Brown Island was more bad news for Rory. He looked out at the small bay sparkling in the sunlight, at the rows of blue drums bobbing gently in the water. The fish farm project is ruined, he

thought, and smuggling hasn't got anything to do with our work in the division. But he was intrigued by the agent's story.

"What kind of firearms are they?" Dale asked.

Barney had a small case beside his feet. He opened it and took out a strange-looking gun. It was shaped like a letter *T* with the handle protruding from the center of a barrel fashioned from square black tubing. "You know what this is?" he asked.

"A pretty big pistol," Dale answered.

"It's more than a pistol," Barney said. "It's a machine gun. This is an SWD M-Eleven, nine millimeter. We see a lot of these in our business.

"You can buy this legally for four or five hundred dollars. It comes semi-automatic, but it can easily be converted to full automatic. That makes it a machine gun, and it's illegal.

"Now you sell the weapon for fifteen hundred dollars or more. A pretty good profit, and there's a steady demand . . ."

"And they sell them right here on the river?"

"We've got an informant on the other side," Barney said. "We know one night a week two men—we think they're from the Fort Covington area—take a few of these guns out to an island in the river.

"The rendezvous point is set up in advance. They don't want to meet in the open water; they might attract attention from a patrol or from other operators. At the island they meet the boat with the money and make the exchange. That's the way it works, up until two nights ago."

"Let me guess," said Lee, "something went wrong."

"Yep. A sting had been set up. An undercover agent in Canada put in a big order, for thirty guns, and the plan was to make the arrest after the delivery. But something happened.

"Our man says the Canadian boat with the money was late, and the delivery boys got spooked, maybe by a patrol. They decided to hide the guns so if they got picked up they'd be clean. They stashed the guns on an island, figuring to come back for them a day or so later."

"Lots of islands," Ross said. "Your man say which one?"

Barney looked out at the holding pen in the cove, now empty of fish. "No, but your island sure seems to have somebody's attention."

Dale nodded in agreement. He stepped out on the catwalk and looked down at the water. He could visualize what might have happened that night: two men in a heavily loaded boat, clinging to these pilings, hearing other voices on the river, growing more and more apprehensive. They could be cornered in this cove, arrested or shot,

their cargo seized, fifty thousand dollars' worth of weapons gone. Finally the men pull their boat along the side of the pen, throw their packages across the netting into the water, and race to safety.

"And when they come back they realize they have to cut the netting to get at the guns," Dale said.

"That's the way I read it," Barney answered. He looked at his watch. "I'm running out of time. I've got to set up some security in case that man Ross saw comes back, and I've got to locate a diver and some gear . . ."

"We still don't know for sure if the guns are down there," Dale said slowly.

"You're right, young fellow," said Ross. "So far we're just guessing."

"I used to swim a bit," said Dale, "maybe I could take a look."

A big grin creased Barney's face. "I was hoping you'd say that."

"Bingo," said Lee Bassett.

The bundle contained two of the M-Eleven machine guns and half a dozen empty magazines, wrapped all together in brown plastic.

"Nice going, young fellow," said Ross. "You see any more of these packages down there?"

Dale was using his shirt as a towel. "I'm pretty sure I did."

"They're there," Barney said. "Count on it." He looked at his watch again. "Dale, can you stay here and catch your breath until I get back? I've got to get on to the Joint Customs Group in Rouses Point and the Quebec Provincial Police. I'll take the guns in with me as evidence.

"Lee, you run in and contact the state police and the BCI, bring them up to speed. And get back here with some help if you can."

"You got it," said Lee.

Ross untied his boat. "I've got to get some heavy wire to fix that netting."

Five minutes later Dale sat on the dock alone. The sound of the departing boats had faded, and the cove was quiet except for the water lapping against the pilings. He watched a pair of belted kingfishers fly low over the water. No more free lunch for you guys, he thought.

Maybe we did lose a lot of fish to the birds, he mused. Maybe we should have put some lightweight netting overhead. And maybe had a guard at night. Too late now; the fish farm is history.

At least some of the other projects for the good of the tribe were working out. The new school building. The Head Start program.

The library with books in the Mohawk language. New casinos would bring in revenue for the tribe. And he and Rory and the staff could still work to heal the environment.

The warm sunshine and the exercise were having an effect; Dale's eyes began to close. He glimpsed the shadow of a man standing behind him, an arm raised, swinging down. A burst of pain bloomed in his head, and the world was dark. He crumpled to the dock and lay there.

The man behind him put away his gun and began to tie Dale's hands.

"Dale." A quiet voice was repeating his name. It was annoying him. He shook his head, but the voice was persistent. "Dale." He opened his eyes, but the bright light triggered a stab of pain in his head. He closed his eyes again.

"Dale. Wake up, Dale." This time his eyes stayed open. He saw the edge of a wall of boards and a slice of sky. He turned his head slightly and saw a line of blue drums floating in the water. "Dale." It was Ross, whispering his name.

He realized he was lying on the dock at the corner of the shed, his hands tied behind him. "Don't move, young fellow. Keep your eyes on that clayhead out there."

Dale twisted his head and saw a man on the center catwalk, a beefy, middle-aged white man with a black mustache. Despite the summer heat he wore a long-sleeved wool shirt and was sweating profusely. He was facing away from the dock, drawing a line up out of the water.

Two of them, Dale thought, there were two of them. One man took off; the other hid out somewhere.

"Ross?" he said weakly, his throat dry and tight. "Ross, is that you? I thought you went back to town."

The old Indian reached around the corner of the shed and poured water from a tin cup over Dale's head. It eased the pulsating pain.

"I just went around to the other side of the island," Ross said in a low voice. "Left my boat and came back through the trees to look for the other man. I was up there on the ridge when he sneaked up on you and clubbed you on the head."

Ross tilted another cup of water over Dale's head; the pain was receding.

"What made you think there were two men here this morning?" Dale asked.

"Remember that hat Lee found? The man I saw leaving was wearing a hat. The second hat could have belonged to another man."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"I could have been wrong. Now lie still."

Dale watched the man on the catwalk. There was a grappling hook on the end of his line. He swung it a few times and dropped it in the water. Dale glimpsed a handgun stuck in his belt.

"Untie me, Ross," Dale whispered, "before that guy's partner comes back."

"Just sit tight, young fellow. I'll take care of him."

"But he's got a gun . . ."

"I know. Give me a minute and then call him over here."

The man on the catwalk was tugging on his line. It was snagged on the bottom. Dale could hear him cursing.

Dale tried his voice. "Hey, you! You out there!"

The man heard him and turned around. He could see that Dale was still helplessly tied. He yanked on his line again and then dropped it in disgust. He walked back along the catwalk.

"What do you want, you little Indian creep?"

"You'll never find your guns that way," Dale said. He guessed that from wherever he'd been hiding the man had watched him diving into the water.

The man stopped a few feet from the dock, his hand on the pistol in the waistband of his pants.

"You'll have to swim for them like I did," Dale said easily. "Didn't you see me?"

He saw Ross appear on the far side of the pen, saw him step out on the row of drums, which pitched and danced under his feet. Don't let this guy turn around, Dale told himself, or he'll see Ross. Keep talking, keep his attention.

"What's the matter, fatso? You can't swim?"

The man swabbed his face with his sleeve and glared at Dale. "Keep your mouth shut, punk, or I'll shut it for you."

Dale held his breath as Ross neared the end of the catwalk. Each step threatened to throw him into the water, but Ross seemed not to notice. Later Dale learned that Ross had been one of the Mohawks who were high steel workers in New York City, one of the men with bowstring reflexes who helped raise Manhattan's skyscrapers.

Now Ross was on the catwalk, moving as silently as a cloud. Now he was just two paces behind the man.

"Well, fatso, if you can't swim . . ." Dale said.

Ross snaked his left hand around the man's waist and seized the gun. His right hand landed between the man's shoulders with a powerful shove. The man gave a hoarse shout and flailed his arms as he pitched forward.

"... maybe you'd better take some lessons," Dale finished as the man hit the water with a resounding splash.

An hour later Barney Watt and Lee were back at the island. With Barney was a Canadian Customs agent. Lee had brought another police officer who was equipped with a face mask, swim fins, and an air tank. He and the agent went out on the catwalks to begin retrieving the contraband firearms.

"We've got a present for you," Dale said to Barney and Lee. He led them to the end of the dock where Ross watched over their catch. Sullen and shivering, the man was holding onto one of the pilings.

He was very cold and quite uneasy. He had been forced to remain in the water—a paddle across his knuckles had ended his efforts to climb out. His cursing had brought no response; neither of the two Indians had spoken to him. They stood with their backs turned, talking in low tones.

The man brightened when he saw another white man and a man in uniform approaching. "Get me out of here!" he demanded. "I'm freezing." His anxiety returned when he saw that the man in uniform was another Indian.

Lee handcuffed the man before he let him climb out and stand gasping and dripping on the dock. Lee stood behind him, holding his arms firmly.

The man appealed to Barney, the only other white man in sight. "Those Indian bastards made me stay down there in the water!"

But Barney said nothing. He stepped away and left the man facing Ross and Dale. The younger Indian frowned at him; he was holding a paddle which he passed from hand to hand. The older man's face was stern and dark, his hand brushed against a knife in a sheath on his belt.

"You and the other man hurt our people," the older Indian said to him. "You have much to answer for."

Dale reached out and tapped the man on his forehead. The man flinched; the touch could as easily have been a blow. "You will pay for our fish," Dale told him, "And unless you tell this man what he wants to know, you will go *back* in the water."

Ross took a half step closer; it forced the man to look up into his

face. "If we put you back in the water," Ross said slowly, "you will have lost your fingernails."

The man's mouth opened, and the color drained from his face. He twisted his head to look at Barney. "Did—did you hear that? Did you hear what he said?"

Barney smiled pleasantly. "I didn't hear a thing," he said casually. "Now, what about this partner of yours, where did you say we can find him?"

The recovery of the firearms would be completed in another hour or so. The prisoner sat in Lee's boat, tied securely. His accomplice would be in custody by nightfall, thanks to radio.

"Lee, can you finish up here?"

"Sure thing, Barney. Take care."

The agent turned to Dale. "Well, that's the end of your problem here. Let's go back to town."

"Sure." The problem would be over when he told Rory that the Brown Island Project was ruined and not before, Dale told himself. He shook hands with Ross and stepped into the boat.

Back at the landing on the reservation Barney said, "How about a late lunch at the Bear's Den? My treat."

Dale realized he was starving. The Bear's Den restaurant in Hogsburg had great food, including a superb three-layer chocolate pie. "Fine, if we go by the office first."

Patsy met him at the door, her face serious. "Lee called when he was back in town and told me about the damage," she said, "and I got hold of Mr. Horn in Washington." She paused. "I told him what happened."

Dale stared at her. "How'd he take it? Is he mad?"

"He did say some impolite things," Patsy answered, "but he's not really mad. He said to tell you not to worry. The fish farm idea is too good to drop, and we'll start it up again in the spring, bigger and better."

Weak with relief, Dale sagged against the door. "Why, that's great!"

"One other thing." Patsy grinned at him impishly. "You like trout, don't you, Dale?"

"Sure. Why?"

"Mr. Horn wants us to start working on a cookbook."

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

And it's dishwasher safe. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "July/August Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the February Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 285.

Bones in the Rose Garden

C. M. Chan

The major was expounding as he walked, pausing occasionally to point out some object of interest with his cane or to call his spaniel bitch to heel.

"Of course the park used to be far more extensive," he said. "The family's been selling off parcels for donkey's years. The original gatehouse was back where—um—do you remember the yellow house, inspector?"

The inspector reflected that it would be difficult to forget such an excrescence as the yellow house. But all he said was "But of course."

"That was the original entrance to the estate."

"Then the estate was once very large indeed."

The major nodded, gratified.

They walked on, two men both past eighty now but still in good health. Major Henry Calkins, never a tall man, still stood ramrod straight and had retained both his figure and his hair. His only real trouble was an arthritic knee, which he had resolutely ignored for years, only to give in at last and carry a cane. Inspector Guillaume Doucet was a full

head taller and a few years younger, but for all that, his middle had thickened noticeably since his youth and the top of his head was now completely bald. He wore thick glasses.

They had both, in their time, given exemplary service to their respective countries, first in World War II and afterwards as policemen. It was there that they had met each other in the course of a now long-forgotten murder case. They had taken to each other at once and were still friends now, some forty years later.

They strolled on through a wooded section of the park with the scent of bluebells heavy in the early summer air while the spaniel romped ahead. As they emerged from the trees, the swells of the South Downs filled the horizon, and before them lay a long, gentle rise on which were parked two earthmovers and various pieces of construction equipment.

"The manor house was at the top of the hill," said the major, pointing with his cane. "They razed it just a few months back."

"A pity," said Doucet. "I

thought your National Trust stepped in to save these old places."

"Not always. It wasn't a particularly distinguished house—a lot of bad Victorian renovations. And recently, of course, it had been let go. The owner, Alex Damson, died about ten years ago, and most of it was already falling apart then. It would have cost millions to put right. Just not worth it, you see."

The inspector shook his head sadly. "He had no family, Mr. Damson?"

"Two sons, I think. But they'd moved out years ago."

Doucet nodded and returned his attention to the present. "And what is it they are doing there?"

He pointed to where the turf had been worn away to well-packed dirt around a large rectangular trench.

"They've just started digging the foundations for the bungalows," answered the major. "The clubhouse will go where the manor house used to be, of course, and the driving range will be on the other side. All this here will be bungalows for the tourists. It's better than a high-rise hotel at any rate." He looked around at the devastation. "I think this used to be the garden."

"Your dog," said Doucet, "has gotten into the trench."

"Oh, really," said the major, hurrying forward. "Millie! Millie, come!"

Millie had long ago learnt that there was no penalty incurred for ignoring such a summons. By the time the two men had reached the edge of the newly dug foundations, she was still happily digging in a corner.

"Hi! Millie!" shouted the major, with no effect whatsoever. "I wonder if I could climb down there," he muttered.

Doucet, eyeing the four foot depth and mindful of the major's knee, was alarmed. His friend might, he reasoned, get down all right, but there would be no getting him back up again. "No, no, *mon ami*," he said hastily. "I am sure she will come. Call her again. Yes, see, she comes now."

Indeed, Millie had abandoned her digging for the moment and was bounding toward them with something in her mouth. She leaped easily up to ground level and deposited her prize at the major's feet. Then she sat panting happily up at him, but the usual praise died on the major's lips. He had gotten a look at what she had brought back.

Doucet exchanged glances with his friend and bent to pick it up. He turned it over in his hands: a long, brown bone.

"Looks like an ulna," said the major tonelessly.

"Yes," agreed Doucet. "It is." He sniffed it.

"Waxy?"

"No. No smell at all."

Their eyes traveled to the hole the dog had dug in one side of the foundation. Amid the clumps of dark earth there showed in places what might have been brownish-yellow stones.

"Well," said the major, "I expect we'd best take Millie's friend here and drive down to the police station."

"Yes," agreed Doucet. "I'm sure that would be best."

"Jack," said Phillip Bethancourt, "we really should hurry."

"All right," grumbled Detective Sergeant Jack Gibbons, closing the file he had been working on and putting it away in his desk. "Just let me freshen up—"

He was interrupted by the appearance of Detective Superintendent Wallace Carmichael, his superior. The superintendent did not look surprised to see Bethancourt, since that young man was a passionate amateur sleuth and often dogged Gibbons' footsteps on a case.

"We're heading to Sussex tomorrow," he told his sergeant. "A rather different case this time—they've dug up a skeleton at a construction site."

"A skeleton, sir?" said Gibbons

dubiously. Skeletons at construction sites were not unknown, but they were usually a case for the Royal Archaeology Society rather than the police.

"Yes," said Carmichael. "And you'll never guess who found it. Henry Calkins."

It took Gibbons a moment. "Not *Major* Calkins?" he said. "Why, I thought he was—I mean, I assumed—"

"No, the old boy's still alive," said Carmichael, answering the thought.

"Who's Major Calkins?" asked Bethancourt.

Both policemen stared at him.

"Well," said Carmichael in a moment, "I guess you wouldn't know."

"He's a legend," said Gibbons. "In over thirty years, he never had an unsolved case."

"He was with the Yard?" asked Bethancourt, confused. "Why 'major,' then?"

"It was his RAF rank in the war," said Carmichael. "I don't know why it stuck. He made chief superintendent here, but no one ever called him anything but the major."

"You knew him, didn't you, sir?"

"I worked under him once, just after I joined the force," answered Carmichael. "One of his last cases. I was just a D.C., so I didn't really have much to do with him, but of course he made

a tremendous impression. He had very blue eyes, and they could be cold as ice if you said anything stupid. Stare right through you, he would."

"It'll be interesting to meet him," said Gibbons.

"Yes, about that," said Carmichael, recalled to the present. "I don't think I'll bother coming in tomorrow. It'll be easier to drive out from my house, so I'm afraid you'll have to take the train."

Bethancourt coughed. "Uh, sir," he said, "if you wouldn't mind my tagging along, I could drive Jack down."

Carmichael smiled at him. "Thought you might offer," he said. "It'll be fine if you want to come. We'll be meeting the archaeologist and the forensic anthropologist at the local police station at ten. They'll take us straight out to the site, so don't be late."

"No, sir," promised Bethancourt, while Gibbons made a mental note to ring his friend in the morning and make sure he was awake.

The major and Doucet had agreed that, having turned the bone over to police custody, the case was no longer of concern to them; that it would be beneath their dignity to meddle in the investigation; and that the case would no doubt turn out to be deadily dull anyway. But neither

man could keep from thinking about it. There was, after all, the possibility that this would not be an open-and-shut case but one of those complex and delicate investigations that took all of a man's intuition and experience to solve, that presented an almost insurmountable challenge at the outset, and that gave the greatest fulfilment when success was achieved. It was for such cases that they both had once lived, and although they were now nearly two decades out of practice, the instinct for such cases was not wholly dormant.

"Do you know," said the major casually as they settled themselves in the small living room of his bungalow after dinner that evening, "I was thinking that we might as well go along tomorrow and see them dig up those bones."

"It would be gratifying," agreed Doucet, "to see the anthropologist confirm our estimation of the bones' age. That policeman didn't want to believe us."

The major grinned. "My thought exactly," he said. "I hope the young idiot will be there. Trying to make out they were from some Celtic burial." He snorted.

"Ridiculous," said Doucet. "They weren't petrified at all—anyone could see that."

The major wore a thoughtful look. "They're old, though," he said. "No waxy smell at all. I seem to recollect that smell hangs about for a goodish number of years."

"Fifteen or twenty, I think," said Doucet.

The major slapped the arm of his chair. "What a daft old bugger I am," he said. Doucet raised an eyebrow. "Up until about ten years ago," explained the major, "the Damson family was still in residence. I showed you where the house was—not a hundred yards from the gravesite."

"Well, well," said Doucet, impressed. "So if the bones are at least fifteen years old, that would mean—"

"The Damsons—or one of them at least—had something to do with it."

Digging up a skeleton was not half as entertaining as Bethancourt had thought it might be. There were four young archaeologists, each shifting soil a millimeter at a time. They were hovered over by the forensic anthropologist, a Dr. Susan Kellar, but after the first half hour everyone else had lost interest. Carmichael and Gibbons had gathered information on the recent history of the estate and its previous owners from the local police, and now

Carmichael was listening with a glazed look to his opposite number from the West Sussex C.I.D. expound on the plans for the new golf course. Gibbons was attempting to placate the man from the construction company, who, despite the forensic anthropologist's assertion that the bones were between twenty and thirty years old, was extremely concerned that construction would be held up for an archaeological excavation. So Bethancourt was left to hover on the outskirts of the group, throwing sticks for his borzoi, Cerberus, and occasionally wandering back to see if any bones had actually come out of the ground yet.

He was just returning from one of these forays when his attention was caught by the sight of a spaniel galloping out of the trees on a direct line for Cerberus, who stood poised and waiting. The spaniel was followed in a few moments by two elderly men, one of whom called "Millie!" repeatedly and ineffectually.

Bethancourt watched the spaniel guardedly, but apparently she had only the most benign intentions towards his own pet. The two dogs met, feathered tails waving industriously, and began the polite sniffing that marks the beginning of any canine acquaintance. Bethan-

court strolled over and waited for the two men to come up.

They were a little older than he had thought at first, but he noticed as they drew closer that both had very shrewd eyes. The shorter of the two maintained a very erect bearing, like a military man's, and as he came up, his eyes were revealed as a clear blue. Bethancourt guessed who he was even before he spoke.

"You the bone man?" he asked abruptly.

"No, sir," answered Bethancourt. "The bone woman is over there with the archaeologists. I'm Phillip Bethancourt."

He held out a hand, which the major shook with a firm grasp.

"Henry Calkins," he said. "This is my houseguest, Guillaume Doucet."

Doucet and Bethancourt shook hands.

"You're not a reporter," said the major, taking in Bethancourt's clothes. "Not unless they're paying reporters a great deal more than they were in my day. You're certainly not a policeman."

Bethancourt's lips twitched. "I'm just a friend of one of the officers," he replied. "I offered him a lift down, and he invited me to see the doings."

The major clearly did not know what to make of this, but at that moment Doucet inter-

rupted. He had been peering at the activity in the trench and now said, "Tell us, Mr. Bethancourt, have they said how old the skeleton is?"

"Between twenty and thirty years, I believe," answered Bethancourt.

The older men shot triumphant glances at each other.

"And is that young idiot Tyler here?" asked the major with glee.

Bethancourt was a little startled; Superintendent Tyler was fifty if he was a day.

"He's over there, talking to Superintendent Carmichael," he answered.

"Then let's go, shall we?"

Bethancourt joined them as they strolled toward the gravesite. "Superintendent Carmichael," he said, "once worked with you, major, when he was just a detective constable."

"Did he?" The major squinted at the senior policeman. "He doesn't look familiar, but then I don't expect he would; it must be twenty years ago."

"Twenty years," observed Doucet, "will change a man's appearance considerably."

"Mmm," agreed the major. "Carmichael you said his name was?"

At the gravesite, the entire skeleton had finally been uncovered, and Dr. Kellar was crouching over it intently while every-

one else gathered around to hear her pronouncements. The major and Doucet slipped up beside the two superintendents.

"Hello, Tyler," said the major cheerfully. "Still think it's a Celtic burial?"

Dr. Kellar's head snapped around. "Celtic?" she said incredulously. "Whyever would you think it was Celtic?"

"Not at all," mumbled Tyler, reddening. "That is, I don't." He cleared his throat. "You were quite right, major, Mr. Doucet. Uh—let me introduce Detective Superintendent Carmichael from the Yard."

"Carmichael!" The major beamed and extended a hand. "Good to see you again, lad. This is Guillaume Doucet, once *inspecteur principal* of the Sûreté."

Carmichael shook hands with them both, absurdly pleased that the major had remembered him.

Dr. Kellar, having got over her shock that anyone could have mistaken twenty-year-old bones for two-thousand-year-old ones, had returned her attention to the skeleton.

"Definitely female," she said now, immediately collecting everyone's attention. "And adult, as I said before. I'll be able to give you a better estimate of her age and her height once I'm back at the lab."

"Any indication of how she died?" asked Carmichael.

Dr. Kellar shook her head. "Not yet," she answered. "We'll take a few more photos and then start getting her out."

Everyone moved back to give the photographer room to maneuver.

"Twenty to thirty years ago," mused the major. "Just about the time you and I were working on that case, eh, Carmichael?"

"Yes, sir."

"Twenty to thirty years tell you anything?" asked the major, watching Carmichael sharply.

Under those piercing blue eyes Carmichael felt his twenty years of experience melt away. The sensation was distinctly uncomfortable. When a man has spent twenty years working himself up from detective constable to detective superintendent, he does not like to feel as if he has suddenly been reduced to his original rank. He tried to pull his thoughts together and remind himself that whatever the major thought of him it could hardly affect his career at this point.

"Hopefully we'll get a lead from Missing Persons," he said neutrally, but the major continued to wait for more, and Carmichael could not help but notice that Doucet was also watching him. He went from de-

tective constable to schoolboy in front of a particularly severe orals board. "And of course we'll want to talk to the Damsons," he added desperately. "Tyler tells me they would have been in residence at the time."

"So they were," agreed the major, apparently satisfied.

"Henry tells me," said Doucet, "that this used to be the garden."

"Was it really?" asked Carmichael, immensely relieved at the change of subject. "Hard to imagine now, isn't it?"

Bethancourt had been observing this conversation from Carmichael's other side, much amused by the major's manner and Carmichael's reaction to it. Now, however, he leaned forward.

"If this was the garden," he said, "then the house must have been close by."

"Right over there, on that rise," said the major. "Didn't Tyler show you?"

"No," answered Bethancourt, and the major snorted.

Carmichael's eyes had narrowed. "But that can't be more than a hundred yards away," he said. "Possibly less."

"The gardens are very often attached to the manor house," observed Bethancourt. He too was eyeing the landscape. "In this case there were probably steps down to a terrace and then

more steps down to the garden proper."

The major beamed at him. "Exactly so," he said.

"We'd better get a plan of this place," said Carmichael.

"Sir!" called Gibbons. He had continued to watch Dr. Kellar at work and was now beckoning to them.

"Cause of the death," said Dr. Kellar with satisfaction. She was holding the skull, just removed from the earth, and turned to display it to them. Her square fingers indicated a hole. "Bullet wound," she said. "Pretty small caliber—at a guess, I'd say a .22."

Carmichael glanced back at the house site. "They should have heard it," he said.

"But it wouldn't have been especially loud," said Tyler. "Twenty or thirty years ago, there were still plenty of poachers down here. If there was no commotion after the shot, they mightn't think much of it."

"If it was at night," said Doucet, "it might not have been loud enough to waken them, especially if the bedrooms were on the farther side of the house."

"Well, I can't tell you any of that," said Dr. Kellar impatiently. "What I *can* say is that it was fired at relatively close range. Here's the exit wound, you see. At much distance, I'd

expect a .22 to remain lodged in the brain."

"I see," said Carmichael.

They all watched while she and the archaeologists gently excavated the rest of the bones and packed them away, but no more revelations were forthcoming. Dr. Kellar was anxious to get back to her lab and have a better look at the bones, and Carmichael was equally anxious to find a plan of the old house and grounds. It was then, as everyone was hurrying back to the cars, that Gibbons looked around and noticed that the major, Doucet, and Bethancourt had all disappeared.

Bethancourt would not have noticed the two older men's departure had he not been keeping half an eye on his dog. Cerberus having disappeared from the immediate surroundings, his owner looked farther afield and saw the borzoi romping happily with Millie as she accompanied her master back toward the trees. Bethancourt hurried after them.

"You're leaving, are you?" he asked as he caught them up.

The major shrugged. "They won't find out anything more for the moment," he said. "And we're not young men any more—there's only a limited amount of time one can spend

standing around after one reaches eighty."

"So you're going back to have a nice sitdown?" said Bethancourt in a wholly disbelieving tone of voice.

Doucet chuckled. "But of course," he said. "What else?"

"Then do let me offer you a ride," said Bethancourt.

"No, no," said the major. "We wouldn't want to drag you away from the excitement."

"But you've just said there isn't going to be any more excitement," pointed out Bethancourt. "And I hate to think what my mother would say if she knew I was letting two weary octogenarians walk all the way home when my car's just over there."

The major's eyes were amused. "It's no use, inspector," he said. "This young man doesn't believe we're just going to go quietly home and sit by the fire. Oh all right, Bethancourt, you can come along if you like."

"Thank you, sir," said Bethancourt. "Where are we going?"

"To sit down, of course. We thought a good place to sit might be my neighbor's, Mrs. Dugan's. She's a widow now, but twenty years ago she was married to the butler at Damsen hall and worked as the housekeeper there."

"I'd love to meet her," said Be-

thancourt, whose interest in any case always stemmed from the personalities he encountered in connection with it. "Would you like to take the car?"

"No, no," said the major. "It's not far."

Mrs. Dugan was a large red-faced woman of about sixty who eyed her visitors dubiously. Since his wife had died, the major was not always an easy neighbor to have.

She was in her front garden when they arrived, pruning the roses. She looked up to see the three men leaning over her gate and hear the major say, in a most ingratiating tone, "Good afternoon, Mrs. Dugan. I must say, those flowers are magnificent. I don't know how you do it."

"Hard work, major," she answered shortly.

The major ignored her tone. "Have you met my houseguest, Mrs. Dugan? This is Guillaume Doucet. And this is a friend of ours, Phillip Bethancourt."

"How do you do?" she replied, a shade more amicably. She could not bring herself to be uncivil to strangers. "I hope you're enjoying your visit to Sussex."

"*Magnifique*," said Doucet.

"It's simply ripping," said Bethancourt.

They beamed at her.

"I've just been taking them round the old Damson estate,"

said the major. "They admired it enormously."

Doucet and Bethancourt began to express their delight in the estate, but Mrs. Dugan wasn't listening.

"I thought they were digging up that body there today," she said.

"So they are," said the major. "We looked in on it. A woman, it was, buried there twenty or thirty years ago, in the garden."

"In the garden!" exclaimed Mrs. Dugan. "But that's not possible. Twenty or thirty years ago, did you say? Why, the garden was in beautiful trim back then. Very extensive it was, and well looked after. Joe Althorpe was the gardener, and a very hardworking man, I'm sure."

"Be that as it may, Mrs. Dugan," said the major, "there's no denying she was buried there. Tell me, did Joe Althorpe have a wife or a mistress?"

"He's still got a wife," retorted Mrs. Dugan. "They'll be having their golden anniversary come September. I see what you're getting at, major, don't think I don't, but you're on the wrong track for sure. Joe Althorpe's been crazy about his missus from the day he met her. He wouldn't look at another woman, and even if he did, he wouldn't murder anyone."

"I'll take your word for it, Mrs. Dugan," said the major. "But

we're just trying to think, you see, who this girl could have been. Did you perhaps have a maid that ran off, or that you had to let go abruptly? Preferably one with a boyfriend."

"I had enough trouble with their boyfriends," admitted Mrs. Dugan, "but I can't call to mind any that ran off. And anyway, major, I don't see what call you have to assume it was somebody belonged to the house. Most likely it was some stranger."

The major shook his head. "Now, Mrs. Dugan, don't try to make out you're not clever. You know it had to be someone connected to the house. If it had been a stranger, he would have buried her in some out-of-the-way corner, nearer the walls. No one would drag a body all the way up to the garden where he might be seen by one of the Damsons."

"But there were never any women connected to the house," protested Mrs. Dugan. "Just myself, Mrs. Damson, and the cook."

"What about girlfriends of the Damson sons?"

"Well, there were plenty of those. Although . . ." Mrs. Dugan looked thoughtful. "Most of the boys' goings-on would be farther back than thirty years. Let's see, thirty from ninety-six . . . no, they were a bit older then. Mr. Oliver was already in a solicitor's office. And Mr.

Ethan wasn't even at home—he'd left university and gone off to South Africa. Although he did come back for a few months around that time."

"And did he bring women down to the Hall while he was here?"

Mrs. Dugan snorted. "No. He was all taken up with Debra Farrell. They eloped off to South Africa in the end, but she was a terrible minx—it was that Jamie Wetheridge who introduced her. He was a cousin of the Damsons, a poor relation. I never liked him. He was always coming round for what he could get, and Mr. Damson gave him more than he could afford, I'm sure."

"Well, our body can't be her if she went off to South Africa," said the major a little impatiently. "We're looking for a girl who was presumed to have left the estate abruptly but who in fact never left it at all. What about Joe Althorpe's help? He must have had someone to help him on the grounds."

"There were his sons," said Mrs. Dugan. "But I wouldn't know about their girlfriends. And anyway, they wouldn't have been bringing them up to the estate."

"Oh, I don't know," said the major. "A romantic walk in the gardens by moonlight? It might be pretty difficult for a young

man to resist. Easy to hide in the dark if anybody came along."

"I suppose," said Mrs. Dugan doubtfully.

"But," interposed Doucet, "why would one of them bring a gun to a romantic interlude?"

"True," agreed the major. "Unless it was premeditated."

"A gun?" Mrs. Dugan looked startled. "Is that how she was killed?"

"Yes, didn't I say? She was shot through the head with a small caliber revolver."

Mrs. Dugan shook her head. "Then that's hardly a crime of passion, is it?" she said. "Having an argument and ending it with a quick bash on the head is one thing, but a gun is quite another. No, it must have been poachers. An accident perhaps."

"I said a small caliber gun," said the major. "A .22 we think. It's hardly the sort of thing you'd shoot rabbits with."

"Oh," said Mrs. Dugan, unconvinced. She knew nothing about guns, and clearly to her one was as good as another.

"Well," said the major, "you give it some thought, Mrs. Dugan. I'm sure something will come to you—after all, nobody knew more about what went on in Damson Hall than you did. In fact, why don't you come in for tea later? If you're not busy with the police, that is. After all,

you're going to be an important witness."

Mrs. Dugan, flattered by this speech into forgetting any past enmity, accepted the invitation. They bade her goodbye and moved off in the direction of the major's bungalow.

"Joe Althorpe next?" asked Doucet.

"I think so," answered the major. "We'll have to take the car. He lives over in the next village." He looked at Bethancourt. "Will you want to come?" he asked.

"I'd love to," answered Bethancourt. "Thank you for asking me, sir."

"I can't say you've been much help so far," said the major.

"No," agreed Bethancourt. "But then you hardly need any help. And I'm learning an enormous amount watching you work."

Doucet smiled. "Far be it from us to discourage education."

"Quite right," said the major. "Well, the dogs will have to stay in the yard—there isn't room for them in the car."

Joe Althorpe was a tall, thin man of about seventy, slow in movement and laconic in speech. His wife Mary was also quiet but had a cheerful manner. She invited them into the neat little cottage and put on a pot of tea.

"We've heard about some

bones' being found up at the old place," said Althorpe. "Odd, that."

"We've just been up to have a look," said the major. "They've got archaeologists and anthropologists all swarming around. Plus the police, of course."

The Althorpes shook their heads at such activity.

"The estate should never have been left empty like that for so long," said Mrs. Althorpe. "So unpleasant for you, major, to come upon something like that."

The major forbore to say that for over thirty years his job had been to deal with things far more unpleasant than a few neatly buried bones.

"Well, as a matter of fact," he said, "the bones have been there a good deal longer than that. Twenty or thirty years, so the anthropologist says."

The Althorpes stared at him.

"Twenty or thirty years?" echoed Joe. "But that would mean he was buried there while the Damsons were still in residence."

"I'm afraid so," said Doucet.

"And it's a she," said the major. "We don't have much more than that at present—just that it was an adult female, killed with a small caliber revolver and buried twenty to thirty years back."

The Althorpes absorbed this

in shocked silence, but Doucet's next words galvanized them.

"Did you know it was in the garden that she was found?" asked Doucet.

"In the garden?" repeated Joe, raising his brows. "Now that's not likely at all. What part of it?"

"We don't know," admitted the major. "It's all been leveled out now for the development, so it's hard to tell."

"It really can't be," said Mary. "If she was buried in the garden proper, Joe would have noticed, wouldn't you, Joe?"

"That's right," agreed Althorpe. "Twenty years ago I was in that garden every day except Sunday. And round the park, too, at least once a week. It must have been in the wooded parts somewhere."

"No," said the major. "It's barely possible it might have been just outside the garden, but I've been walking my dog up there ever since the Damsons left the place, and I'm reasonably sure the place is in the garden proper. Down towards the end, near where the rose trees were."

"Well, that's the garden right enough." Althorpe looked puzzled. "I don't see how it could be, though. If someone had been digging up things and putting them back, I'd have been sure to

notice. You can't mistake fresh-turned earth."

"Perhaps," said Bethancourt, "if you had been replanting things yourself, you might not have noticed? The earth would have been fresh-turned then in any case."

"You could be right," admitted Althorpe. He thought for a moment. "In fact, it might have been twenty or so years ago that I put in those rose trees. You remember, Mary, how Mrs. Damson decided she wanted a proper rose garden and had the south end of the garden all redone? I left the gravel walks, but I had everything else up and roses put in. It was a worry all that spring, but they did all right in the end."

"I remember," agreed Mary. "And I think it must have been about twenty years ago—perhaps twenty-five."

"That must be it, then," said the major. "So we can deduce that she was killed in the spring. Can you remember anything else that was going on about that time?"

There was a long pause while the Althorpes thought back.

"I didn't really have much to do with the house," apologized Althorpe. "And we've never been much for gossip, Mary and me. I just came up, did my work, and went home at the end of the day. The body might be anyone for all I know."

"For all we know, too," admitted the major. "And until we can discover who she was, it's nearly impossible to find out who killed her. I think myself it must have been one of the sons' girlfriends, since Mrs. Dugan says it can't have been any of the maids."

Mrs. Althorpe looked uncomfortable. "But one of their girlfriends," she said, "that would mean the murderer was one of the family, wouldn't it? I really can't believe it of them, can you, Joe?"

Althorpe shook his head. "Mr. Ethan was thought to be a bit wild," he said, "but a murderer—no, I wouldn't have believed it."

"It might have been a house-guest," said Bethancourt, who sympathized with the Althorpes' feelings.

They brightened slightly. "Yes, that's true," said Mary. "Perhaps some gentleman who killed his wife and then left early. The Damsons might not have noticed the lady hadn't said goodbye."

"Anything's possible at this stage," said the major, but not as if he believed it. "Well, thank you for your help. That bit about the rose garden certainly narrows down the time. Could you say, do you think, exactly what year the roses were planted?"

This involved some discussion, but after referring to the

ages of their three children and various milestones in their lives, they finally fixed it as the spring of 1969, twenty-seven years ago.

The major thanked them once again and took his leave with his companions.

"I think," said Doucet as they drove back to the major's bungalow, "that must be the timing, don't you, major? I had not thought of it, but certainly any decent gardener would have noticed if his plots had been disturbed enough to bury a body."

"Certainly," agreed the major. "And from what they said, the rose garden was disrupted enough to cover any amount of mischief. I'm only worried about whether or not they got the date right. We'd better check at some point with Brian Althorpe and see if his memory coincides with his parents'. For the moment, though, I think it's time for lunch. The Stanford Arms always has most of the oldtimers in—we'll go there."

The Stanford Arms had little to differentiate it from the hundreds of other country pubs throughout England. It was of middling size with a worn carpet and the usual hodgepodge of furniture. Most of the clientele were elderly, but none of them seemed to interest the major. After one look at the hot dishes,

all three of them ordered ploughman's lunch and settled down at a table, the major and Doucet against the wall on the padded bench and Bethancourt perched on a stool. Bethancourt was hungry enough not to care about the indifference of the viands, but Doucet was clearly used to better things. He wrinkled his nose and peered dubiously at the hunk of anonymous cheese on his plate.

"You are having a joke?" he said plaintively to the major. "Not even a medieval ploughman could survive on food like this. It isn't cheese—it is an experiment in plastics."

"You can have a large tea at home later," said the major, unperturbed, and washing down his own cheese with a healthy draught of beer. "Just try not to breathe while you eat, and it won't taste like anything at all."

"It does not taste at all now."

"Well, I want to try to catch Leila Collins, and this is the best place."

"Who is she?" asked Bethancourt.

The major grinned. "The biggest gossip in the village as was her mother before her. If there was ever a scandal connected to the Damsons, she's sure to know of it. I can't think why she didn't show up at the estate this morning. It's unprecedented for her to let a bit

of firsthand gossip like that go off without her."

"Leila and Bob," said an old man sitting off to their right, "have been over to Arundel. Their first grandchild arrived sometime last night."

"Is that so, Nick?" said the major. "Well, that explains it then. Do you know if they're back yet?"

Nick shrugged.

"We'll just have to hope they come in," said the major.

They had finished their lunch and were on their second pints when a couple entered, a stocky man in his fifties and a rather plain woman with a goodnatured face. They were greeted enthusiastically and questioned intently about the birth of their grandchild. This, then, assumed Bethancourt, must be the Collinses.

It took some time for the subject of the grandchild and the well-being of his mother to be exhausted, particularly among the ladies, but eventually they began to run down and Leila herself introduced the Damson estate bones into the conversation. She was naturally referred to the major.

"Why, I didn't see you there, major," she said. "And Monsieur Doucet, too. Were you there this morning?"

"Of course," answered the major. "But there's not much known yet. A complete skeleton

it was, of a woman. She'd been shot through the head."

"No!" gasped Leila, titillated. "How very dreadful. It was all bones, you say?"

"Yes," said the major, and Leila was clearly disappointed that no gore could be included. Then she frowned.

"I don't know much about these things," she said, "certainly not as much as *you*, major, or you, Monsieur Doucet, but if it's all bones, doesn't that mean she's been in there rather a long time?"

The major beamed at her like a schoolmaster with a particularly promising pupil. "Exactly," he said. "You're very quick. The anthropologist says she was buried between twenty and thirty years ago. You don't remember any stories of a girl running off from Damson Hall, do you? A maid, perhaps, or one of the sons' lady friends?"

"Oh my," said Leila. "Just fancy that! When I heard you'd found human remains up there, major, I made sure it must have been from some passing hooligan because we get them even here, you know, Monsieur Doucet. Some motorcyclists perhaps, I thought, and certainly after Alex Damson passed on."

"An understandable inference," said the major, and repeated his question about missing girls.

"Well, I can't say that I do remember anything like that," said Leila. "The Damsons were always a very respectable family, you know. There was never anything to tell of them, except of course that affair with Debra Farrell."

"The girl Ethan Damson married?" asked the major.

"Yes, that's right. Come to think of it, if you'd only found a man's body, too, it could have been Ethan and Debra. After all, no one ever heard from them again after they left to elope. There was a complete split with the family—the only one Ethan might have kept up with was his mother, but she died soon afterwards."

"But they left the estate abruptly?"

"Oh yes, after a tremendous row. Ethan had been the black sheep ever since he left Cambridge before he'd taken his degree and refused to go back. There were a good many arguments about that, I can tell you, but nothing the Damsons said would make him go back. Mr. Damson kicked him out of the house over it, but Ethan didn't seem to mind that the way he should have. He went up to London and very shortly afterwards he left with some friends for South Africa. He kept in touch occasionally, but he was gone for three or four years. And then he

came back one winter and wanted money to put into a business venture he was starting up. Mr. Damson refused, but Ethan stuck around a bit trying to persuade him. Debra Farrell was staying at Damson Hall off and on during that time and there was a kind of understanding between her and Oliver. Not an engagement, but everyone thought that's where they were heading. And then she meets Ethan and starts to fancy him—he was the handsomer of the two, I will say that—and oh! what a to-do there was then. For a while there no one was sure who she would marry in the end, and meanwhile Ethan and his father were still having rows about the money. Well, what it all came down to was that Ethan finally said he'd do without and that they'd never see a penny from him even if Damson Hall fell down about their ears. And he and Debra left that very night for London and went from there to South Africa with never a word from them since."

This had clearly been a choice bit of gossip in its day, and Leila obviously felt it lost nothing in the retelling. The major nodded appreciatively.

"And when was this, do you recall?"

"Well, I'm not exactly sure," admitted Leila, "but the body

couldn't be them anyway, and I can't remember any other women. But naturally I wasn't an intimate of the Damsons. You could ask old Mrs. Trevelyan—she's still doddering on up at the family's place. The Trevelyans were always very close to the Damsons and were at the Hall all the time—why, Oliver married Alice Trevelyan. Or there's Reverend Allen—he used to dine at the Damsons' quite regularly in the old days."

The major thanked her gravely and, swallowing the last of his beer, said he thought it was time they were on their way.

Gibbons, having interviewed the retired village constable and obtained a list of possible witnesses, found Carmichael entrenched at the library amid a morass of papers and documents. Damson Hall was an old estate, and apparently anything ever done to it had been documented in triplicate. But Carmichael had waded through it all and had at last found notes and charts describing the recreation of the original rose garden at the south end of the plot in 1968. He was busy calculating feet and inches from the house when Gibbons arrived.

"That's fine, sergeant," he said when Gibbons had finished reporting. "We'll get onto this Mrs.

Dugan as soon as we've finished here. The constable and I have nearly done with our measurements, and we'd best run out with some tape measures afterwards so we can see exactly what was there when the body was buried. Thank God the house's foundations are still there. And the constable's found some photos that show the gardens as he remembers them. Show him, Pierce."

Pierce dug out the pictures, as well as some of the house, and Gibbons pored over them while Carmichael sketched and added. He would never have recognized it as the same place he had been that morning, and he studied them intently, with reference to Carmichael's plot, trying to fix them in his mind.

"You can see in this one," said Pierce, "how the gardens led right off the south terrace. See, there are these stairs down the hill here, and then the first garden along here, with the yew trees. And then there's more stairs at either end leading down to the next level."

"Constable," said Carmichael, "perhaps you'd best fetch those tape measures now so we can leave as soon as I've done. And, Gibbons, as you're here now, you can make a plan of the house, and we can have Mrs. Dugan point out whose bedroom was where later."

Gibbons, wishing he had more artistic talent or at least could draw a straight line, managed a crude sketch of all three stories of the house while Carmichael put the finishing touches on his own far better plan of the garden. Then, with Constable Pierce and the tape measures, they drove out to Damson Hall.

"If the police aren't there, we'll have Mrs. Dugan over," said the major as he drove them all back to his bungalow.

"The thing to do," agreed Doucet, "is to find something that will jog her memory back to the spring the rose garden was planted."

"Well, we'll soon see if we can," said the major, pulling up before his bungalow. "There are no police cars in evidence—I wonder if they've come and gone or not been yet. Here, you two go in and get tea started while I wander over and see if she's available."

Inside, Bethancourt filled the kettle and unpacked the confections they had purchased at the baker's while Doucet got out the tea things and then settled down to making sandwiches.

"It will have to be a very large tea," he said, "to make up for that lunch."

In a few minutes the major returned alone. "She's coming," he announced. "I told her about the

rose garden, and she's going to look out Mr. Dugan's journals." He scowled. "If I'd known to begin with that the old boy was jotting down everything that happened . . . well, never mind. Witnesses never do tell you what you want to know to begin with."

They had a munificent tea set up in the sitting room when Mrs. Dugan arrived, carrying four large ledger-type books. "I've brought 1967, '68, '69, and '70," she said. "Just in case the Althorpes got the year wrong. We'll have to look through a bit—the journals mostly deal with the house, but I well remember what a job that rose garden was and I can't believe Alfred wouldn't have mentioned it."

"It's good that you recollect it so well," said Doucet, handing her a cup of tea and moving the confections nearer to her hand.

She sighed. "Oh, I remember it well enough—Mrs. Damson used to talk about it regularly. But it's in a void, like. I can't recollect what else might have been happening at the same time."

They settled down with their tea and provender, the large books opened on their laps. Bethancourt had 1968 and opened it as instructed to April.

"For," said Mrs. Dugan, "Joe Althorpe can't have started the planting before then."

The books were a curious combination of the kind of daybook any butler might keep and a more private sort of journal. April first, for example, began with a notation of a leaky drain-pipe, who had been called to repair it, and an estimate of the cost. There was mention of the evening's dinner guests and a careful account of the dinner service used, including the linen and candlesticks, and the menu. Then he went on:

"Dora very tired tonight, with only Mrs. Hayes to help her during the day. Gave her feet a rub, and she fell asleep in the middle. Earnestly hope we find new maid soon."

Bethancourt looked up. "Your name is Dora, Mrs. Dugan?" he asked.

She swallowed the last of a cream puff and nodded.

Bethancourt returned to the book, glancing down each page briefly for any mention of Althorpe or the rose garden. Then an initial caught his eye and he turned back.

"Mr. E. returned from London today. Stayed closeted with Mr. D. for over an hour just before tea, but no loud voices this time, thank God. Mr. O. will be down at the weekend, and it is to be hoped he can smooth things over. Dora, however, thinks he will only make things worse; strange, since I have always

thought he was a favorite with her."

And on the following Saturday:

"Dora was right. Mr. Oliver sided with his father most strongly and quarreled with Mr. Ethan after dinner tonight. Miss Debra overheard some of it, and I found her trying to calm Mr. O. down later. Mr. E. has made no mention of how long he plans to stay."

So it had been in the spring of 1968 that Ethan and Debra had eloped. If the rose garden had not been planted until the next year, as the Althorpes had said, then the young couple could not have been either murderer or victim. Bethancourt read on, paying more attention now, but for the next fortnight Dugan confined his remarks to the acceptability of the new maid and to various household affairs. Ethan was clearly still staying at the house, but not much more was said of his relations with his father.

At the beginning of May a large houseparty had been given. Dugan carefully noted all of the guests and detailed the arrangements, noting in what seemed a worried tone that the affair had cost a great deal. He also noted that Miss Debra had danced rather more often with Mr. Ethan than he would have expected.

Apparently Debra Farrell had stayed on after the party, for her name was regularly mentioned. Another argument occurred between Ethan and his father over telephone calls placed to South Africa.

I cannot understand why Mr. D. should have been so angry [wrote Dugan], as Mr. E. apparently intended to pay for the charges himself, and said so as soon as he was confronted.

And then, in the next entry, was what Bethancourt had been looking for:

Dora and I walked down to the garden this evening to see how Althorpe is getting on with the roses, but there is nothing to see yet. The south section looks very bare and denuded with everything pulled up. Some of the plants have arrived, but Althorpe explained that he was preparing the ground first; apparently roses like a certain kind of soil. He said he would begin planting at the beginning of next week, but that he was having some trouble getting hold of the rose trees Mrs. D. had expressed a preference for and it would be another month or two before everything was settled.

Bethancourt looked up to tell the others what he'd found, but then it occurred to him that this would mean handing over the book directly to Mrs. Dugan and he wanted to see for himself how things had gone on in Mr. Dugan's view. He read hastily, keeping the rose garden entry marked with his finger.

Ethan made another weekend trip to London in mid-May, and was accompanied by Debra Farrell. Thereafter, Oliver had apparently seen which way the wind was blowing because he began to stay at Damson Hall, commuting to his work in Chichester. There were several arguments between the brothers and at least one between Oliver and Debra. But Dugan refrained from filling in any details or making any comments except to say that "Dora has never cared for Miss Debra and of late has taken to calling her a minx."

Towards the end of May, what Dugan described as a "violent quarrel" had occurred between Mr. Damson and Ethan when Mr. Damson discovered that Ethan had been going over the Damson Hall accounts secretly. This row was enough to disrupt dinner for the evening and send all the family to their rooms early. There was a series of subsequent arguments during which Ethan appeared to be

trying to point out to his father ways in which the estate could be better handled. There were also frequent disagreements between the brothers, to combat which Mrs. Damson invited the Trevelyan children over to play peacemakers. They were Ethan and Oliver's oldest friends, and throughout the end of May and the beginning of June Alice and her two brothers were listed in the daybook as having been over for dinner or tea or to go riding or for any number of other activities.

There had been another houseparty—much smaller this time—on the second weekend in June, and it was here that the crisis had come to a head. Ethan apparently received a phone call from South Africa that he felt necessitated his return. He had tried one last appeal to both his father and brother, which had predictably resulted in yet another quarrel, this one excessively loud. The guests, even the peacemaking Trevelyans, had been quite embarrassed, since it was clearly audible in the drawing room where they were gathered. Debra had apparently done her best to cover it by playing the piano, but even that had not been adequate to cover the noise. Ethan had eventually stormed out and gone to his room.

It was only later that they re-

alized he had packed up and left the house.

Dora and I were startled this morning [wrote Dugan in the next day's entry], to find Mr. Ethan knocking at the tradesmen's entrance. He requested me to ask his mother to come down without alerting his father or brother, which I did. They spoke together for some little time in the butler's pantry, but I do not think it was a very happy interview, as Mrs. D. emerged with tears in her eyes and Mr. E. looked quite vexed. He spoke to Dora and me then, thanking us for all we had done for him and saying he thought it unlikely he would see us again, as he had broken completely with his father and would return at the end of the week to South Africa. He asked if Miss Debra were in the house, but I was able to tell him that she had gone down to the garden to see the rose trees which had just arrived. He left by the tradesmen's entrance, and I confess I watched and saw him turn down the walk to the garden.

But apparently whatever he had said had not convinced her at once, for she was noted as being at dinner both that night and the next. On the following

morning, however, there was this:

Mrs. D. came down this morning after breakfast to inform Dora and myself that Miss Debra had left to join Mr. Ethan. Dora, of course, is quite pleased to see her go, although she confessed herself a bit surprised. I, however, always found her to be a very pleasant young woman, kind and considerate. Nor can I rejoice in the obvious distress this has caused Mr. Oliver.

Bethancourt turned back to the first entry he had found concerning the rose garden and said, "I think I've got it here. There's a note on the sixteenth of May that you and he went down to look at the rose garden, but that it was still all dug up."

Mrs. Dugan closed her book at once, and Bethancourt handed her the 1968 volume, open at the entry for May sixteenth.

"Good lad," said the major, closing his own book. "Which one did you have? Nineteen sixty-eight? Well, it's not surprising the Althorpes were off by a year."

"I've found mention of both Debra Farrell and Ethan Damsen," Bethancourt told him. "It was the same spring they eloped."

"Well now," said the major,

smiling at Doucet. "That makes it all a little more interesting, doesn't it?"

Doucet gave a little nod.

"Of course!" exclaimed Mrs. Dugan, who had been reading. "Mabel! That was the spring we hired Mabel. How could I have forgotten—she was the best maid we'd had in a long time. Or for a long time after she left for that matter."

She continued to read, her eyes moving slowly down the pages, and occasionally muttering to herself. "Yes," she said, "it all comes back now. I remember the troubles with Mr. Ethan perfectly, but I would never have said it was the same year we had the rose garden done. It's funny how your memory plays tricks on you. But I don't see as there's much here to help you, major."

"There were two houseparties," put in Bethancourt, "and some weekend guests. Mr. Dugan lists them all, and we could check and make certain they're all still hale and hearty—or at least died in their beds."

"But Alfred would have put down if any of them disappeared in the night," protested Mrs. Dugan. "It's not as if he wouldn't have noticed. And he would always be there when they did go off, on account of having to bring down their cases and things."

"Better check all the same," said the major. "Just because he brought down the luggage doesn't mean that he actually saw all of them. But the most obvious suspect is Debra Farrell."

Mrs. Dugan was nonplussed. "But she married Mr. Ethan," she said.

"In the book," said Bethancourt, "Mr. Dugan just states that Mrs. Damson said she believed that was what happened. Debra didn't leave with Ethan, nor did Mr. Dugan see her go because Mrs. Damson had to tell him of it."

"That's true," admitted Mrs. Dugan. "But they were eloping, after all. Mr. Ethan must have come for her very early in the morning."

"But then how did anyone know what had happened to her?"

Mrs. Dugan was looking at the book again. "There was a note," she said slowly. "Mrs. Damson came down that morning and said Debra had gone and would I please make up the room. And Alfred, naturally, asked if he should go and bring down her things. Mrs. Damson said no, she had gone early that morning and left a note to say she was going with Mr. Ethan to South Africa."

"So no one saw her go," said Doucet.

"I'll bet any amount," said the

major, "that she never reached South Africa. In fact, I doubt she ever made it as far as the A286."

Mrs. Dugan spluttered in protest.

"Now then," said Carmichael, "we're probably a foot or two off on account of the plan being a bird's-eye view and we having to measure over hill and dale, so to speak. But we should have a general idea."

There were clouds gathering on the horizon, and a cool wind had sprung up, blowing fitfully, but the policemen paid no notice. It had taken them half an hour or so to measure the distance from the site of the old terrace steps to the makeshift grave as best they could. They had gone in a line as straight as they could manage, angling southwest to strike the grave, and now, having added up the figures, Carmichael was retracing their path with a ruler on his plan of the garden.

"It looks to me, sir," said Gibbons respectfully, "as if we were right down at the bottom."

Carmichael grinned at him. "Where the rose garden was. The garden that was dug up and redone twenty-eight years ago. Well, well, let's see."

He bent over the plan he had made in the library, spreading it flat on the earth and counting under his breath. Gibbons and

Constable Pierce peered over his shoulder.

"Yes," he said in a moment, "it's just as I thought. According to this, we'd be a few feet beyond the garden. But when I allow for that hill, it puts us squarely at the bottom of the rose garden."

"So she must have been buried here in the spring of '68," said Pierce enthusiastically.

"Well," said Carmichael, folding up his plan, "it's likely but not certain. At any rate it gives us a starting point. Let's go see the housekeeper now and find out what she can remember about that spring."

But they got no answer at Mrs. Dugan's house.

"A pity," said Carmichael, frowning at the firmly closed door.

"She might just have gone out to tea, sir," offered Gibbons. "We could try back in a little bit."

"Yes, we'll do that," said Carmichael. He was looking down the road a little hesitantly. "Didn't you say, Gibbons, that that was Major Calkins' bungalow?"

"Yes, sir," answered Gibbons. "Shall we try there since we can't find Mrs. Dugan?"

Carmichael hesitated. Then he sighed. "I suppose we'd better," he said. "Not that I expect he knows much more, but still . . . I feel I didn't really talk much to him this morning."

They walked down the lane,

Carmichael leading the way rather slowly as if unsure about the wisdom of this course. As they approached the bungalow, however, he straightened his shoulders, cleared his throat, and rapped authoritatively on the door. This was greeted by barking.

"There're two dogs in there," observed Gibbons, "and the major only had the one this morning. I think we've probably found Phillip."

Carmichael only grunted in response.

In another moment the door opened, and they were assaulted by a nearly frantic spaniel and a more restrained borzoi. The major himself stood in the opening, leaning on his cane and beaming at them.

"Carmichael, my lad!" he said. "I'm delighted to see you. Come in, come in. We've just been having a little chat, and I think we've identified your body. Tentatively at least. Sit down, have some tea, and we'll tell you all about it."

Carmichael's shoulders sagged. He had not yet set foot over the threshold and already his investigation had been appropriated.

Over a pot of fresh tea the major and Doucet related their activities and the conclusions they had drawn. Carmichael immediately took charge of the journal while Gibbons rose to

peer over his shoulder. Mrs. Dugan, having had it firmly pointed out to her that, if the body was indeed that of Debra Farrell, then one of the Damsons was almost certainly guilty of murder, sat silent and defiant.

"Well," said Carmichael, setting the book aside, "it certainly seems a likely theory."

"I don't believe it," began Mrs. Dugan, when suddenly she stopped and her eyes opened wide. "Of course!" she exclaimed. "I knew it couldn't have been any of the Damsons. It was that Jamie Wetheridge, that's who it was. I'm sure of it. He was always a bad one, that boy."

"Who was Jamie Wetheridge?" asked Carmichael.

"A poor relation of the Damsons. It was he who brought Debra Farrell to the Hall to begin with. And he was there that night, he was always invited to the parties."

"And where would we find him now?" asked Carmichael.

She sniffed. "I wouldn't know, nor would I want to. You ask Mr. Oliver—I'm sure Jamie's kept in touch with him."

Gibbons jotted this down in his notebook.

"The first thing," said Carmichael firmly, "is to see what Dr. Kellar says about the body's age and height. I should think she'd have that much done by this

evening. Can you describe Debra Farrell, Mrs. Dugan?"

"She was a little slip of a thing," answered Mrs. Dugan. "Shorter than me and very slender. Very blonde, too, although I always thought that owed something to peroxide."

"If that fits Dr. Kellar's estimates, then it shouldn't be much trouble to discover whether or not Ethan was ever married to her, or even whether she's still his wife now."

"Yes, yes," said the major impatiently, "process of elimination. We all know how that goes. And if Debra is alive and well in South Africa, then we're back to square one, we know that. But if she's not, then we must look for a way to narrow down the possibilities. Anyone who was at the house that night might have killed her. Here, let's have a look at that guest list."

"I've got it here, sir," said Gibbons, flipping back a page of his notebook. "Michael, Christopher, and Alice Trevelyan," he read. "Jamie Wetheridge, and Mr. and Mrs. Robert Norville. They were the only ones who stayed the night. The Trevelyan parents were also at dinner, as was Reverend Allen, a Miss Dorothy Coleman, and a Mr. David Pierce."

"Mr. Norville," said Mrs. Dugan, "was a junior partner in the same solicitor's office as

Oliver. Miss Coleman was a friend of Miss Alice's, and she brought Mr. Pierce as I recall. At least, I don't remember him from the earlier days."

"More information is needed," suggested Doucet. "For instance, if Miss Farrell was seen after the dinner guests left, then none of them can have killed her."

"Quite right," said Carmichael, rising. "And we'd best set about finding that information. Mrs. Dugan, I'd like to take this ledger with me if I may. I'll write you a receipt for it, and you'll get it back, but it may prove to be a most important piece of evidence."

Mrs. Dugan, doubtful but overruled, acquiesced. While Gibbons wrote out a receipt for her on a fresh page of his notebook and Carmichael thanked the major heartily for his help, Doucet took Bethancourt aside.

"You'd best go with them now," he murmured. "But you'll keep the major and me informed, no? I am sure your mother would not like it if you were to take advantage of two elderly men."

Bethancourt grinned. "I'm sure she wouldn't," he said.

"I have written down the telephone number," said Doucet, offering him a slip of paper.

Bethancourt put it in his pocket. "If I left Cerberus here," he suggested, "I would have an excuse to stop by later before we

left. And he'd be happier playing with Millie than stuck in the car. Do you think Major Calkins would mind?"

"Not at all," said Doucet. "He is a very well-behaved dog. Leave him with us, and we will take care of him."

"Age and height," said Carmichael, checking his watch as they got into the car, "will be about the first things Dr. Kellar will determine. I'd say she probably knows already. Let's head back to the police station and ring her from there."

"Yes, sir," said Gibbons, letting in the clutch.

At the station they were given an unoccupied desk to work from. Carmichael sat in the chair to place the call while Gibbons and Bethancourt perched on either side of the desktop.

"We've got a possible identification of the victim," Carmichael told the doctor when she answered, "and—no, no, I won't give you any details. I just wanted to know if you'd got around to height and age yet. . . . That's splendid. . . ."

Bethancourt and Gibbons leaned over as Carmichael jotted the figures down on the pad.

"Five foot two or three? Yes. And about eight stone? Yes, that would make her rather petite.

And age? I see, twenty to twenty-five. Well, we may be on the right track then at this end. . . . Really? That would be marvelous, certainly. No, I don't know that as yet, but I'll work on it. Yes, yes, by all means have him in—I'm sure I'll be able to turn up something. Thank you very much, Dr. Kellar."

Carmichael rang off and smiled up at his subordinate. "She says there should be no problem retrieving DNA for comparison from either the ribs or the teeth. All we've got to do is find a relative of Debra Farrell's and we'll have certain identification."

"If it's her," said Gibbons.

"Yes, that's next." Carmichael frowned. "Really, the easiest way is just to ring Ethan Damson and find out who his wife is. Do we have any idea where in South Africa he was supposed to be living?"

"Johannesburg was mentioned," said Bethancourt. He shrugged. "Of course, it's been twenty years. . . ."

"Easy enough to check out. I just hope there's not a long list of Ethan Damsons."

There were only three. Carmichael dialed the first one and identified himself to the woman who answered the phone and admitted to being Mrs. Damson.

"To be frank," Carmichael continued, "I'm not certain that you

are the Damsons we're looking for. Did your husband originally come from England, in Sussex?"

"Yes, that's right," she answered.

"Then I think it must be your husband we're looking for."

"He's not here," she said. "He's at his office and I don't know when exactly he'll be back. In half an hour, surely."

"That's all right," said Carmichael. "You may be able to help us yourself. We're looking into the possible disappearance of a woman named Debra Farrell."

"I don't know anyone by that name," she said. "And I can't see what it could have to do with us in any case. I've never been to England, and my husband hasn't been there in decades."

"She disappeared nearly thirty years ago," said Carmichael. "Here in Sussex it's widely believed that she left to marry your husband. Are you his first wife?"

"So far as I know," she answered dryly. "We've been married for twenty-five years, and—oh, wait. I think I hear Ethan coming in now."

There was a long pause. Faintly, Carmichael could make out voices, but not what they said. In another moment, a man's voice came on the line, crisp and businesslike.

"Superintendent Carmichael? I'm Ethan Damson. What's all

this nonsense about Debra Farrell?"

"We've been told, sir," said Carmichael, "that she left with you for South Africa thirty years ago, presumably to be married."

"Well, she did no such thing," replied Damson. "To the best of my belief, she married my brother Oliver."

"No, sir. He married Alice Trevelyan."

There was a pause.

"You mean he threw her over for Alice? I would never have thought it of him. But wait, you told Clare that Debra was missing. Do you mean missing since I left Damson Hall?"

"That's right."

"Well, this is rather incredible, superintendent. If she's been missing for twenty-eight years, how is it you're just looking for her now?"

"We've found a body buried on the Damson estate, which we believe may be the remains of Miss Farrell," said Carmichael levelly. "Our forensic anthropologist estimates it was buried there about thirty years ago."

"A body?" Damson seemed stunned. "Are you certain it's Debra?"

"Not as yet, sir. In the course of our investigations, it was brought to our attention that Miss Farrell left the house abruptly about thirty years ago

and had not been heard of since. Our informants believed she had eloped with you. I was really calling to confirm that she was indeed your wife and was alive and well. Since you say you left her in England, we will have to investigate further."

"Yes, of course."

"Can you remember the last time you saw her, sir?"

"Yes, of course I can. That is, well . . ." His voice trailed off. "Actually, I'm not sure I do remember. I know I spoke to her in the garden shortly before I left to return here. I think that must have been the last time because I did ask her to come with me."

"And she refused?"

"More or less. She was afraid of going to a new country with a man who had nothing but plans. She wasn't sure she'd like South Africa, and she was worried that we'd end up destitute. If you read between the lines, that meant my brother was a safer bet, and she thought she'd better take it. I told her where I was staying in London and when I'd be leaving and said I hoped she'd change her mind. I gave her my address in Johannesburg, too, in case she decided later that she'd made a mistake. But I never heard from her."

"You might, however, have been mistaken about her intentions toward your brother?"

Damson snorted. "I doubt it. I won't make any bones about it, superintendent: they were just about engaged when I went back home and stole her from him. All's fair in love and war, you know. And I was really taken with her, from the first time I saw her. I may be a bit hazy about the last time I saw her, but I remember the first time like it was yesterday."

"But you weren't taken enough with her to change your plans about returning to live in South Africa?"

"I couldn't. I was already tied up in various business ventures down here—people were depending on me. I told her that if she didn't like it, I'd wrap things up and we'd come back, but I suppose she could see that it wouldn't be easy to get me away if the business turned profitable. As, of course, it did."

"How did you feel about being rejected, Mr. Damson?"

Carmichael's voice was smooth, but Damson didn't take the question well.

"Like anybody would, I suppose," he said coolly. "Don't tell me nobody's ever rejected you, superintendent."

"Not when I was proposing marriage," retorted Carmichael. "Come, Mr. Damson, it's a reasonable question, considering the circumstances. I have to ask it. Were you angry?"

"I suppose I was. And disappointed. And hurt. Who wouldn't be? But if you mean, was I angry enough to strangle her, or hit her over the head, or however she died, no. Moreover, as I recollect the encounter, it was in broad daylight. It would have been a little tricky digging a grave with the gardener and my family milling about."

"Then who do you think did kill her?"

"I don't know," said Damson, still testy. "And if I've understood you correctly, you're not even sure it is Debra. It seems much more likely to me that it's someone else entirely."

"We'll be looking into that, of course," said Carmichael. "You've been a great deal of help, Mr. Damson. We may be calling you again if we turn up anything further."

"Of course," said Damson automatically. "Of course, if it is Debra, I'd be only too willing to do whatever I could."

"That's very kind of you, sir. I appreciate that. Thank you again."

Carmichael rang off and rose at once.

"Let's get over to Oliver Damson's before Ethan has a chance to call him—I want to be the one to break the news. I'll brief you on the way."

Oliver Damson's house was quite a comedown from the Vic-

torian mansion he had grown up in. It was a modest, two story affair of brick on the outskirts of Chichester, set a little ways back from the road amid several large beech trees. In the drive was parked last year's Honda, from which Bethancourt deduced that the Damsons were doing moderately well.

Oliver Damson opened the door himself, an entirely average looking man in his fifties. His medium brown hair was streaked with grey and thinning on top, and behind gold-rimmed glasses, his blue eyes were pleasant.

He smiled when Carmichael introduced himself and his companions.

"We wondered if we'd see you," he said. "Chris Trevelyan told us about the body. Come in and meet my wife."

He led the detectives into a comfortable sitting room. There was no fire in the grate, but Alice Damson nevertheless sat in an easy chair drawn up to the fireplace, a glass of sherry on the table by her side. She had kept her figure, but her face showed her age and her clothes, though neat, were rather dowdy. Her only remarkable feature was her eyes, which were a very dark blue.

Her husband introduced her and took the chair on the other

side of the fireplace, waving his guests to the sofa.

"So have you dug it up yet, superintendent?" he asked cheerfully.

"We did that this morning," answered Carmichael, equally genial. "A forensic anthropologist is working on the bones now, but we have a little preliminary information to go on. They're the bones of a woman in her early twenties, about five two or three in height, and slender. She was buried in the rose garden approximately thirty years ago."

"What?" Oliver sat bolt upright, and Alice's remarkable eyes opened wide. "But we were still there then—all of us, I mean, the whole family."

Carmichael was unmoved. "So I understand," he said. "After a pre—"

"In the rose garden?" interrupted Alice. "But that's so near the house. How could anyone . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Let the superintendent finish, dear," said Oliver.

"After a preliminary investigation," repeated Carmichael, "we have reason to suspect that the body is that of Debra Farrell."

The Damsons looked dazed.

"I believe you both knew her?"

Alice glanced at her husband, as though asking if they should

admit to knowing a murder victim, but Oliver was staring at Carmichael.

"Yes, of course we did," he said. "But she married my brother Ethan and went with him to South Africa."

Carmichael shook his head. "I've just finished speaking to your brother and his wife," he said. "She is his first wife, and she is not Debra Farrell. Your brother admits asking Miss Farrell to marry him but says that she refused. He left for South Africa without her."

"But that's impossible!" burst out Oliver. "Everyone knows she married him. I mean—" He appealed to his wife with a look.

Alice was frowning. "He must have married her," she agreed. "At least, I'm sure he meant to. They eloped—why wouldn't they have married?"

"I know it's difficult," said Carmichael, "when you've accepted something as an accomplished fact for nearly thirty years, to be suddenly told that it's not true at all. But you must believe me: Debra Farrell did not marry Ethan Damson, nor did she accompany him to South Africa. Your brother would have nothing to gain by lying about that."

"Well, I suppose not at that."

"But that's why you think it's Debra's body, isn't it?" asked Alice. "Because she disappeared

from here and now she's not where everyone supposed she was."

"That's one reason," agreed Carmichael. "In fact, I was hoping you might be able to help us with further identification. Perhaps you could supply us with the names of her nearest relatives for DNA identification."

The Damsons exchanged glances.

"I don't think she had any relatives," said Oliver. "Aside from us, that is."

"You were related?" Carmichael was surprised.

Oliver waved a hand. "Only very distantly. I think she was the great-granddaughter of my maternal great-grandmother's sister. Or perhaps it was only a half-sister. Something like that."

"She hadn't any immediate family," put in Alice. "She was an only child and was orphaned. I believe she was brought up in a convent somewhere, wasn't she, Oliver?"

"That's right," said Oliver, looking slightly surprised. "I hadn't thought of that in years. Somewhere near Oxford I think it was."

"Can you remember the last time you saw Miss Farrell?"

"Oh Lord." Oliver leaned back in his chair and looked pensive. "Well, it must have been the night before she and Ethan left.

Or, rather, the night before we thought they left."

Alice frowned as she searched her memory. "It was at that party, wasn't it? It must have been. They—I mean, Ethan left directly after that."

"Was there a party? Yes, I think you're right."

Alice laughed. "No one else will ever forget it. You and your father had a tremendous row with Ethan in the study while the rest of us sat in the drawing room and tried to pretend we couldn't hear. Your poor mother was mortified. Debra and I tried playing the piano to cover the noise, but a full orchestra playing the 1812 Overture wouldn't have been enough to drown you out."

Oliver looked slightly taken aback. "I think you must be exaggerating, my dear," he said. "I don't remember disrupting a party."

Alice laughed again. "You just ask Chris or Michael. Or my mother."

"So there was an argument on the night of the party?" asked Carmichael.

Oliver nodded. "It was the last of many. Ethan had been home for some months by then, and the argument was ongoing. He wanted a substantial sum of money to put into a business he was starting in South Africa. You have to understand, super-

intendent, that Ethan had never been very reliable. He came down from Cambridge because he was bored with it. He got jobs and then chucked them after a few months because he thought they were tiresome. And he never seemed to see what was wrong about any of it. Ethan was always absolutely certain that he and he alone was right. My father would have had to sell off some investments to make up the sum, and he didn't want to. Ethan argued that a few of the investments should be cashed in and that the rest could be raised by selling part of the estate." Oliver paused. "In retrospect, he was probably right about those investments. I think he was a better businessman than Father and I gave him credit for. But at the time I supported my father. I suppose," he added, somewhat shamefacedly, "that I also felt Ethan was trying to take my inheritance as well as his own." He shook his head, smiling ruefully. "Little did I know there wasn't going to be any."

"And on that last night?" prompted Carmichael.

"I don't remember what set it off that night—no, I do. Ethan had gotten a phone call from one of his partners. Apparently they needed the money at once. Well, I don't recollect all the details now, but in the end Ethan

stormed out, swearing he would never set foot in the house again, nor give us a penny when we finally came to the end of our ropes. As, of course, we did—at least where the Hall was concerned. He left that night, and in the morning we found that Debra had gone with him."

"You found she was gone," corrected Carmichael. "Did you just assume she had accompanied your brother?"

"No. I believe—yes, there was a note. My mother found it when she went up to see why Debra hadn't come down to breakfast."

"Did you see it?"

"Oh yes." Oliver frowned, as at an unpleasant memory.

"And you recognized her handwriting?"

The frown deepened. "I expect I must have. Not that I suppose I'd seen much of it—we'd never written to each other."

"So you can't say for certain that Miss Farrell indeed wrote it?"

"Well, no. I guess I can't."

"How about you, Mrs. Damson?"

Alice shook her head. "I never saw the note. Even if I had, I don't think I'd ever seen Debra's handwriting."

"Does either of you know what happened to the note?"

Oliver looked embarrassed. "I rather think I tore it up. I was

upset, you see." He glanced sideways at his wife.

"It's all right, dear," she said. "It was thirty years ago, after all. I don't mind any more."

"Your brother," said Carmichael, "was under the impression Miss Farrell had refused him in order to marry you. He was surprised to discover she was not your wife."

Oliver chuckled. "That's a good one," he said, "both of us thinking the other was married to her for the past thirty years. Well, I was in love with her at the time. I hadn't actually proposed, but I intended to and I'm sure she knew it. Debra lost her secretarial job sometime that spring—not her fault, the office closed—and Mother invited her to stay at the Hall. I had just started in practice and had taken a little flat here in Chichester. Sometimes she'd come to meet me after work, and I'd go home at the weekends. Then Ethan came back."

"And he fell in love with her, too," supplied Carmichael.

Oliver nodded. "I didn't realize it at first," he said. "In fact, I was rather slow to catch on. But it finally penetrated after they spent a weekend in town together."

"So when she apparently eloped with your brother, you were not entirely surprised."

"Well, I don't know," he answered thoughtfully. "Not entire-

ly, but I was surprised. I still had the idea, you see, that she hadn't quite made up her mind. And," he added defensively, "it wasn't all wishful thinking. You see, after that weekend I moved back to the Hall and almost immediately had an enormous row with Debra. After a little consideration, even I could see that screaming wasn't going to win her back. So I spent a week or two making up to her and then I did propose. She didn't accept me, but she didn't say no, either."

"She was confused," put in Alice. "I was around quite a lot that spring, and she'd talk to me sometimes, although as a rule she was very reserved. I think she had been very happy with you, Oliver, and then Ethan descended and swept her off her feet. But she did still care for you, and she just didn't know which way to jump."

"I see," said Carmichael. "Thank you both for being so frank about it."

Oliver shrugged. "It's all water under the bridge now," he said. "I haven't thought of Debra in donkey's years. And," he added, glancing at his wife, "I've been very glad she didn't marry me for a long time now."

"Having set the scene, so to speak," said Carmichael, "can either of you think of anyone who might have wanted to kill her?"

They both shook their heads.

"I can't," said Alice. "Debra was really very sweet. Everyone liked her."

Carmichael nodded; it was the answer he had expected. "How about the Norvilles?" he asked. "Did they know her well?"

The Damsons looked confused.

"Robert and Jane?" asked Oliver. "Well, I expect they might have met her. Why on earth would you ask about them?"

"Because they stayed at Damson Hall the night Miss Farrell disappeared," answered Carmichael. "Contrary to the way you both remember it, Ethan Damson left on a Friday night, at the start of a houseparty. Miss Farrell stayed on and was discovered missing the following Monday."

"Really?" said Oliver doubtfully. "I'm trying to think, but it still seems to me that they left together. Are you sure?"

"Quite sure," said Carmichael. "Your butler kept a journal."

"Well, if you say so," said Alice. "Although, now I think of it, it does seem to me that I can remember calming Debra down after Ethan was gone. I can't be sure, though—it could have been at some other time."

"Then neither of you remembers that Sunday evening?"

asked Carmichael. "It was the tail end of the houseparty. You and your brothers had been staying there, Mrs. Damson, as well as your parents, although they left after dinner. Reverend Allen was also there for dinner and left afterwards. The Norvilles and Jamie Wetheridge stayed on overnight."

There was a long pause while the Damsons searched their memories, but in the end they both shook their heads.

"My mother might be able to help," said Alice. "She always kept a diary, and her memory's really quite exceptional for her age." She sighed. "In fact, sometimes her memories of thirty years ago seem better than her memories of last week."

"Well, we all come to it in the end, Mrs. Damson," said Carmichael kindly. "I'd like to talk with everyone who was there that night. Do you suppose you could give me everyone's addresses and phone numbers?"

"Certainly," said Alice, rising. "I'll write them out for you."

"Before you do, Mrs. Damson, I have one more question. Was anyone at Damson Hall that night in possession of a small caliber pistol? Say a .22?"

The Damsons looked dumbfounded. Alice sat back down rather abruptly.

"Debra was *shot*?" asked Oliver incredulously.

"Yes, sir," said Carmichael. "About the gun?"

Oliver was shaking his head, but Alice said, "There were all kinds of guns at the Hall. I don't particularly remember a .22, but there may well have been one—or even a couple. Do you remember, Oliver?"

"No," he answered. "They were mostly hunting rifles. We did have pistols for target practice, but I was never much interested in that. There may have been a .22."

"What happened to the guns?" asked Carmichael.

"Father sold them a few years before he died." Oliver made a face. "Yet another short-term effort to try to stem the tide."

"Were they sold as a group or one at a time?"

"Oh, as a group. Dan Morrison here in Chichester took them on. He's got a gun shop and often deals in antique weapons. Not that any of ours really merited that title."

Gibbons noted down Morrison's name.

"I'll get you those addresses." Alice rose.

"I'll come with you, Mrs. Damson," said Gibbons. "Easier for me to copy them down in my notebook."

"I'm curious, Mr. Damson," said Carmichael as they left the room. "Your father died, as I understand it, some years ago, yet

you only put the estate on the market last year."

"It was entailed," said Oliver. "I did my best to persuade the old man to sell, but he wouldn't have it. In the end, he was living in just a couple of rooms—the rest of the place was falling apart, and I certainly didn't have the money to keep it up. We could have sold at any time while he was still alive, but of course once he was dead, I had to wait until my son came of age to break the entail. He gained his majority last year. It was past time. My father had to sell practically everything in the Hall over the years just to hang onto the property, and in the end, of course, he was selling off parcels of land to make ends meet."

Alice and Gibbons returned shortly, and then the detectives left, thanking the Damsons for their help.

"Where to now, sir?" asked Gibbons in the car.

"It's too late for the gun shop owner," said Carmichael regretfully. "Is anyone else on our list located in Chichester?"

"Only the Norvilles, sir."

"We'll skip them," decided Carmichael. "I doubt they know anything—they don't seem to have been much involved, and it would be unlikely that they would remember a dinner party thirty years ago. Let's head back

to the village and look up the Reverend Allen. If Debra Farrell was brought up in a convent, she may have confided in him. The way I see it," he continued, as Gibbons guided the car out into the traffic, "is that Ethan Damson's abrupt departure was the catalyst. All at once, Debra Farrell had to make up her mind and somebody didn't like her decision."

"But we still don't know what that decision was," said Bethancourt. "If Ethan is telling the truth, she didn't announce firmly to him that she was going to marry his brother—he just assumed that if she didn't marry him, she'd marry Oliver."

"And she might have changed her mind," agreed Carmichael. "She might well have written that note and then been found out by Oliver before she could leave. Or Ethan could have come back for a second interview with her on Sunday night, prepared to kill her if she still refused to accompany him."

"But what about the note then, sir?" asked Gibbons.

"Apparently," said Carmichael, disgruntled, "no one knew what her handwriting looked like. Ethan could have written it himself if he'd just taken some care to disguise his own writing. Print, if he usually wrote, for instance."

"It seems to me," mused Bethancourt, "that we haven't really eliminated anyone. There's still the Trevelyan sons and Jamie Wetheridge. Oliver and Ethan were so obsessed with each other, they'd never have noticed if someone else was trying to cut in."

"True enough," said Carmichael. "But we'll get to that by and by."

The rectory was a huge old place across the street from the church. Reverend Allen answered the door himself, an elderly man, tall and spare. He did not wear glasses, but he was clearly nearsighted as he peered at them while Carmichael introduced himself.

"Come in, come in," he said, opening the door wide. "We can sit in my study if you don't mind. Can I offer you anything? I'm afraid my wife is not at home—it's her night for the Women's Institute—but I can make tea. Or coffee. My coffee's not as reliable, however."

Carmichael declined the offer of refreshment and the Reverend led the way down a narrow hall to a surprisingly spacious room at the back of the house. He seated himself behind his desk, fussily clearing away some papers, while Bethancourt and Gibbons pulled up leather-covered chairs to face him.

"Now then," said Allen, searching his desktop in quest, presumably, of his glasses. "What can I do for you, superintendent?" He failed to find them and raised his eyes to squint at Carmichael.

"It's about the bones we dug up on the old Damson estate today," said Carmichael. "I assume you've heard about it?"

"Oh Lord, yes," Allen nodded. "At least half a dozen people have stopped by to tell me about it. A young woman, was it, buried twenty to thirty years ago in the garden?"

"That's right," nodded Carmichael, "only it's closer to thirty than twenty as it turns out. We believe at the moment that the remains are those of Debra Farrell."

"Ah, dear." The Reverend shook his head sorrowfully. "I wondered if that might not be the case. Poor girl."

Carmichael was surprised. "Excuse me, vicar," he said, "do you mean you suspected that she never left to marry Ethan Damson?"

"No, no. Well, not at the time. But I was surprised. Debra was a very loyal girl, and I didn't think she would have jilted Oliver, who after all had the prior claim. But young people were very wild back then, if you remember." He leaned forward slightly, apparently to better

judge their ages. "Well, no, probably you don't."

"I was young myself then, sir," said Carmichael, smiling.

"And no doubt you were wild. You probably didn't think so, but I assure you that's what your elders were thinking. Anyway, when I heard today that the bones were those of a young woman, I started to think who it might be. And then I remembered Debra and how surprised I was when she ran off with Ethan, and I began to think that perhaps she hadn't after all."

"Do you recollect the last time you saw her?"

Allen shrugged. "Not really, no. Probably at a dinner up at the Hall. I used to be invited up quite often on a Sunday, or to fill in at a dinner party. They entertained a good deal back then. And of course Debra was a regular churchgoer. She'd been brought up in a convent orphanage. So I might have seen her at Sunday service."

"She disappeared the weekend Ethan Damson left the Hall after a quarrel with his brother and father," said Carmichael.

"Well, I remember that, of course. Poor Mrs. Damson was most upset. She came down to see me. And, yes, I went up to the Hall for dinner that night or the next. I believe they had a houseparty going. Yes, so that

must have been the last time I saw Debra."

"After Ethan had gone."

Allen frowned. "Yes, I'm sure I saw her after that. As I recollect what Mrs. Damson told me, the quarrel occurred in the evening, and Ethan rushed right out of the house. But I believe she spoke to him afterward, the next day, and tried to persuade him to make up with his father and brother before he left for good. But he refused. She was most distressed about that. And then it was a few days later that Debra left to join him."

"She didn't say anything to you before she left?" asked Carmichael. "From other witnesses, we had gathered that she was having a difficult time making up her mind. I thought perhaps she might have turned to you for advice."

"She did, but that was long before Ethan left. I don't recollect that anything passed between us after that. I'm sure I saw her, and I assumed, since she was there, she had decided in favor of Oliver. I'm afraid I can't help you further than that."

"Clearly you were well aware of the situation between the brothers," said Carmichael. "Did you ever have the impression that either of them was so passionately in love with her

that they might have killed to keep from losing her?"

Allen looked very solemn. "I knew, of course, that you'd ask that. But I have to say it never occurred to me. If you had found either Ethan or Oliver instead of Debra, I'd be bound to say that either brother might have killed the other, as terrible as that seems. But I can't imagine either of them killing Debra. They didn't blame her for the situation—they blamed each other."

"What about their parents, Mr. and Mrs. Damson? Were they pleased with the prospect of Debra as a daughter-in-law?"

"Oh yes, they were quite fond of her. Mrs. Damson had rather taken her under her wing and was very pleased when Oliver began to show an interest. They were both distressed when the problem with Ethan developed, and they clearly felt that it was not right of him to try to engage her affections when she was already involved with Oliver. But I think they blamed Ethan more than her, although of course they wished she would make up her mind one way or the other and put an end to the debate."

"It's been suggested," said Carmichael, "that Jamie Wetheridge was also in love with her."

"He may have been," acknowledged Allen. "For that matter, I believe the Trevelyan boys were

quite taken with her, too. But so far as I know she never encouraged any of them. She was quite set on Oliver until Ethan turned up, and I don't think anyone else was ever in the running."

"Well, thank you, vicar," said Carmichael, starting to rise. "You've been a great help."

"Can I ask," said Allen hesitantly, "how she died?"

"She was shot in the head with a small caliber pistol," answered Carmichael.

"Oh dear," said Allen. "That's very premeditated, isn't it? And I really can't think who might have gone that far. Unless . . ."

"Yes?" asked Carmichael alertly.

"No, no," said Allen. "No, that wouldn't work at all."

"What were you thinking, vicar?" pressed Carmichael.

"Something foolish, I'm afraid," he answered, smiling. "I suddenly remembered a story about a young man Debra knew in London—not a very nice boy, I gathered. But then it came back to me that the end of the story was that he had left to join his sister in Australia, so he couldn't have had anything to do with this."

"Not likely," agreed Carmichael. "Still, people have been known to return from Australia. Do you remember his name?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't. I don't even remember most of the sto-

ry she told me, just that he had been bothering her."

He saw them out, urging them to call on him again if he could be of help.

Outside the vicarage, Carmichael decided it was time for dinner. They ate quickly at the local pub, and then drove out to the Trevelyans' which was, as Gibbons expressed it, out in the back of beyond.

The sun had long since set, and Gibbons slowed the car to a crawl along the long, narrow drive, which was pitted with unexpected potholes. The house, when at last they approached it, was a small manor house of ancient lineage. Christopher Trevelyan, according to his sister, was now in residence, having moved home after his divorce several years ago to care for his aging mother. The eldest brother, Michael, worked in the city and lived outside London in Haslemere.

Christopher Trevelyan was still a goodlooking man. The features that were too strong for feminine beauty in his sister were nearly handsome on a man, and he had the same dark blue eyes.

"Alice said you'd be calling," he said, leading them into the house. "I don't mind saying it's been a bit of a shock, what with us all having thought Debra was safe and married all these years.

Mother's in her sitting room upstairs—she doesn't get around much any more."

"I hope it's not too late for her," said Carmichael.

"Oh no. She's been looking forward to seeing you immensely—all her friends are dead now, and it's not often she gets visitors. Please don't mind if she seems more excited than sorry about it all."

They followed him up the staircase and into a large bedroom, rearranged as a sitting room. In a deep easy chair sat a frail woman, shrunken with age, with snow-white hair. Her dark eyes, however, were as bright as a bird's. On her lap was a small book.

"We've got out the wrong diary, Chris," she said as they entered. "This one only goes up to June of 1966."

"These are the policemen, Mother," he said, ushering them in. "Detective Superintendent Carmichael, Detective Sergeant Gibbons, and their colleague, Mr. Bethancourt."

Mrs. Trevelyan nodded at them. "You, young man," she said to Bethancourt, holding up the book, "take this back to the cabinet and get out the next one. Here, you'll need the key."

"Yes, ma'am," said Bethancourt meekly, coming forward to take both book and key.

The cabinet she pointed out

was the kind used in another era for drinks. Bethancourt opened it and found the bottom shelf nearly full of plain, black-bound books. On the upper shelf was a large jewelry box and, lying beside it, a small pistol, its handle inlaid with mother-of-pearl in a pattern of vines and flowers. It was a .22.

"That's a very handsome pistol in there," he said to Mrs. Trevelyan, handing her the keys and the new book. "You don't see that kind of nacre work any more."

"There's a lot of things you don't see any more," she grumbled, taking the book and opening it on her lap. She looked up at him suspiciously. "I've got a permit for it, if that's what you're hinting at," she said. "We've got permits for all our guns."

"A gun?" asked Carmichael. "As your daughter may have told you, Debra Farrell was killed with a pistol, a .22 we think."

"Well, she wasn't killed with that one," said Mrs. Trevelyan. "I've had it for years and always kept it locked in my bedside table. I moved it in here awhile back, since this is where I spend most of my time these days, and got another one for the nightstand."

Christopher shrugged helplessly at Carmichael's raised brows.

"We've got four .22's, I think," he said. "We were all quite keen on target practice at one time."

"It was thought to be a good thing then," said his mother. "My father taught me to shoot when I was in my teens, and I used to carry my rifle with everyone else during the hunting season. Now, of course, the only ones with guns seem to be the criminals."

"How many of these .22's did you have thirty years ago?" asked Carmichael.

"All of them," answered Mrs. Trevelyan. "But surely you're not suggesting that someone shot Debra here and then carted the body over to Damson Hall to bury it?"

"Actually," said Christopher, "I think we only had three of them then. Don't you remember, Mother, you bought the last one from Dan Morrison much later. I think that's the one you have in your bedroom now."

"Well, perhaps I did," she admitted. "When you've lived as long as I have, inspector, it's hard to keep track."

"Superintendent, Mother," murmured Christopher.

She looked surprised. "It's always 'inspector' in novels," she said.

"Well, apparently this is one instance where life does not imitate art," he answered.

She shrugged. "Well, let's see

what my diary can tell us. I remember Ethan running off," she added, looking up. "He and his father had a big fight right in the middle of a party. Very awkward it was."

"I remember that, too," said Christopher. "I'd spent practically the whole spring over at the Hall trying to make peace between Ethan and his father and Ethan and Oliver."

"That was Agatha Damson's idea," snorted Mrs. Trevelyan. "Shove the Trevelyans into the breach."

"Well, we did calm things down a bit. It's harder to get an argument started if you're in a group."

"It didn't do any good in the end," said Mrs. Trevelyan. "Agatha would have been better off persuading her husband to give Ethan a bit of the ready—the boy had business sense, anybody could see that. And it's not as if he'd ever asked for money before and then lost it. I always thought Alex Damson was being too hard on the boy."

Christopher looked surprised. "You never said anything, Mother."

"Not my place, was it? Your father and I used to discuss it, and he agreed with me. Well, it doesn't matter any more. I did tell Agatha she ought to pack Debra out of her house, but she was too soft-hearted to see the

point. I couldn't press it—it was her house and her sons, after all."

"Mother, you didn't!" Christopher seemed even more surprised. "Things weren't Debra's fault, after all."

"Oh, weren't they?" Mrs. Trevelyan shot him a sharp look and then relented. "I know she had you wrapped around her finger, too. You couldn't be expected to see her for what she was."

"And what was that, Mrs. Trevelyan?" interposed Carmichael.

"She was a crafty little gold-digger," she answered. "There was nothing she liked better than to stir up trouble. Everyone felt sorry for her, caught between Ethan and Oliver and not knowing which way to jump, but you take my word for it, she was reveling in it. One day she'd lean a little more toward Oliver, then the next it'd be Ethan, until none of us knew what to expect. She loved every minute of it."

"I think, Mother," said Christopher coolly, "that you were prejudiced against her because of Alice."

"Nonsense."

"Alice, you see," he continued, turning to Carmichael, "rather fancied Oliver and there was some thought that he might feel the same way until he met De-

bra. And," he added, glaring at his mother, "I was never wrapped around Debra Farrell's finger."

"Oh pooh," said Mrs. Trevelyan. "If Oliver had backed out, both you and Michael would have been standing in line to wait on her."

"I might have asked her out," conceded Christopher. "She was a very pretty girl. But as I recall, I was head over heels for Ethel Cosgrove at the time, and Michael, if you recollect, was already engaged to Nancy."

Mrs. Trevelyan shrugged. "Have it your way," she said, looking back at her diary. "Let's just see if we can discover what happened to the wretched girl, shall we?"

Christopher rolled his eyes.

Mrs. Trevelyan turned pages rapidly. "Ah, here we are," she said in a moment. "This must be the weekend. Now, according to what Alice said, Sunday was the last evening we saw Debra." She turned another page.

"Is that how you remember it, Mr. Trevelyan?" asked Carmichael.

"Not really," said Christopher. "But I can't say my memory's very clear. I remember the argument at the party, though which evening it was I couldn't say. But I don't think I knew that Ethan left that night. I remember asking where he was and

Oliver telling us he'd gone, but that must have been the next day."

"And were you surprised Debra hadn't gone with him?"

Christopher shook his head. "I don't remember thinking about her at all. I suppose I must have, but I don't remember it."

"Well," said Mrs. Trevelyan, looking up from the page she had been reading, "it appears to have been a perfectly ordinary evening."

"If you could read any pertinent passages?" said Carmichael. "I'm particularly interested in any observations about the Damsons' sons or Debra Farrell, and in the activities of everyone on the Sunday."

Mrs. Trevelyan pursed her lips and turned back a page. "Well, let's start at the beginning," she said. "Friday's entry is mostly taken up, of course, with the argument and the way it disrupted the party—you know all about that, and my criticism of the Damsons' behavior is hardly enlightening. Then on Saturday . . ." Her finger moved down the page. "Yes, here: *Agatha came to me after breakfast and told me that Ethan had packed his things and left the house last night. She was very upset to think that he should leave without reconciling with his father. I said there was no help for it but that I was cer-*

tain he wouldn't leave the country without speaking to her again.

"Agatha was looking calmer when Dugan came to request her presence downstairs on some domestic business. I thought I could finally get shot of the whole business—find Frank and hit a few golf balls or something—but instead I found Alice, who wanted sympathy for having spent the last half hour comforting Debra, who was most upset about not seeing Ethan before he left. I told her she was shopping at the wrong store and that all I wanted was to forget the whole mess. Then I totally demeaned myself by asking if Alice thought this meant that Debra had finally decided in favour of Ethan. She said she didn't know, she thought half Debra's hysteria was caused by the need for an immediate decision. I suggested we make a firm pact not to mention the subject again and go work on our golf swings, but she was off to find her brothers and share out the latest news. Young people are such gossips." She paused. "The next bit is all about my evening gown and my husband's indigestion. Oh, then I have: Ethan apparently came to see Agatha this morning but refused to talk to his father and brother. Agatha is clearly feeling better, but still distressed that he should part from the family in

this way. Oliver seems very out of sorts, though Alex is putting on a good face. I suspected if Ethan had seen Agatha he had also seen Debra, and indeed she seemed very pale and quiet tonight and retired early even though the other young people were having dancing in the hall. Well, then there's my opinion of the music they were dancing to—I don't expect you want to hear that?" She looked up almost mischievously.

Carmichael smiled. "No, thank you, ma'am. Though I'm sure it's very illuminating."

"Well, I don't know. I think I've mellowed over the years—although perhaps it was just the volume at which I was first exposed to rock music that made me dislike it so much then. Anyway, on to Sunday. Let's see—we all went to Sunday service, of course, people did in those days. There was a brunch, and then the boys went to play in the village cricket match. My husband and I went to watch, but I don't seem to have put down who else came with us. Then back to the Hall in time to wash and change for dinner. I mention that Debra seemed more composed at dinner, but that's all, aside from some unkind remarks about Mr. Norville with whom I was apparently paired for dinner."

"Robert Norville?" asked Christopher. "I can't imagine what he could have done to offend you. He's really rather dull as a rule."

"Exactly, dear. Dullness is not the primary trait one wishes to find in a dinner partner. Anyway, my husband and I left after dinner, though the children stayed on. Then on Monday I wrote: *The children arrived home today with the news that Debra had left to join Ethan. They seem to discuss it for hours, but all I have to say is good riddance.*" She looked up. "I'm afraid that's all."

"That's very helpful, Mrs. Trevelyan," said Carmichael. He looked at Christopher. "Does it shake loose any memories for you?"

Christopher was leaning back, gazing at the ceiling with his arms crossed. "I do vaguely remember talking to Alice and Michael and Jamie Wetheridge about whether Ethan had really gone for good and what Debra was likely to do, but that's all."

Carmichael nodded. "And Sunday? Do you remember that evening, or perhaps the cricket match?"

Christopher chuckled. "I remember dozens of cricket matches, superintendent. But I couldn't tell you which one was which, and I can't remember why we stayed on Sunday. Nor-

mally we would have come home."

"You had probably planned to stay in your peacekeeping roles, thinking Ethan would still be there," said Mrs. Trevelyan. "It would have been rather awkward to leave if you'd already agreed to stay."

"Yes, you're probably right. But I'm afraid I don't remember anything else. The fact that Debra married Ethan is just *there*, and I can't remember how I heard of it."

"Memory's like that sometimes," agreed Carmichael. "Well, thank you both very much—you've been very helpful and we appreciate it."

"I've enjoyed it," said Mrs. Trevelyan frankly, "even though I'm not usually much of one for dwelling on the past. Actually, I hope you need my diaries again before you're done."

"I'll come by if I do," promised Carmichael. "Thank you again."

"I'll see you out," murmured Christopher.

"Do you think," said Carmichael as they made their way downstairs, "that I could see your gun room before we leave?"

Christopher looked startled, but he said, "Certainly. It's this way." Then he added, "Do you really think she was killed with a gun from this house?"

"I don't know," answered Carmichael. "But it's certainly a

possibility if it turns out there were no .22's at Damson Hall. I assume the Damson family were as at home here as your family seems to have been at the Hall?"

Christopher gave him a troubled look. "Yes, they were."

The gun room could more accurately be described as the sporting room. It was quite small, set beside the back door, and was filled with cricket bats, old croquet sets, bags of golf clubs, and tennis racquets. There was a large collection of the various balls needed to play these sports in two wicker baskets beneath the window. Along one wall a dozen or so rifles were racked, ranging from a very beautiful nineteenth century Italian weapon to a plain and inexpensive shotgun. In a glass case beneath them were arranged several handguns, among them two .22's.

"Help yourself," said Christopher. "They're all unloaded, of course. We keep the ammunition locked up in that chest over there."

"That's all right," said Carmichael. He stepped back to the door. "The back door there—is it kept locked?"

"It is nowadays," answered Christopher. "Thirty years ago, no. I don't think we even locked up at night back then."

Carmichael nodded. "Well, thank you very much for show-

ing me this. It'll probably turn out to be nothing, but we like to cover everything, just in case."

"Certainly, superintendent."

Christopher led the way back to the front hall, and they took their leave of him.

"It's nine o'clock, sir," said Gibbons, checking his watch in the light of the lanterns beside the door. "If we're driving back to London tonight, we ought to get started."

"I don't think we will, lad," said Carmichael. "We'll want to get on to the gun shop in the morning, so we'd just have to come back down. We'll book in at a hotel in Chichester; then, when we've done here tomorrow, we can drive back by way of Haslemere and see Michael Trevelyan."

"Yes, sir," said Gibbons, clearly relieved at not having to make the drive back.

They dropped Bethancourt back at the Damson estate so that he could retrieve his car and agreed on a hotel after consulting the guidebook Carmichael kept in his glove box.

"I'll pick up Cerberus and be along in a bit," said Bethancourt.

He followed them down the drive and then, while they turned in the direction of Chichester, he drove the short distance to the major's bungalow.

At eight thirty the next morning, when Bethancourt entered the hotel restaurant in search of coffee and his friends, he found that the major and Doucet had arrived to accompany the rest of the party to the gun shop. They were seated at a table with Carmichael and Gibbons and another man in his fifties with an upright posture and curly brown-blond hair. He wore an expensive suit, though not one tailored to him, and his tie matched the handkerchief peeking from his breast pocket.

Bethancourt, confused, approached and said good morning.

"Here's the last of our party," said Carmichael, glancing up. "Phillip Bethancourt, Jamie Wetheridge."

He turned back to Wetheridge while Bethancourt, considerably surprised, slid into a chair between Gibbons and the major.

"Apparently he's a motor car salesman," the major whispered to him. "He drove a car down from London yesterday for a client and decided to detour round to the Damsons' on the way back. Naturally they told him what had happened, and he came to find the superintendent of his own accord. Carmichael," he added in an even lower tone, "is a bit miffed because Doucet and I ran into Wetheridge in the

lobby and kept him chatting instead of calling up to Carmichael at once."

Bethancourt nodded.

"Well, of course I was in love with her." Wetheridge was responding to a question of Carmichael's. "We were all at least half in love with her, including Michael Trevelyan, who was more or less engaged already. Debra Farrell was a lovely woman, superintendent, and I mean inside as well as outside. And she had style, a certain—what do the French call it—*je ne sais quoi*." Doucet frowned at the pronunciation. "In fact," admitted Wetheridge, "that was the reason I first took her down to Damson Hall, trying to impress her."

"I understood she was related to the Damsons?" asked Carmichael. "As are you yourself, of course."

Wetheridge shrugged. "We weren't related to each other," he said. "My mother was a cousin of Alex Damson's, and Debra was some distant connection of Agatha Damson's. But I didn't know that when I took her there. See, Debra was an orphan and, not having a real family, had gotten rather keen on her family history. Family trees were one of Aunt Agatha's hobbies, too, and when they got round to comparing notes, they realized they were related. That was enough

to get Aunt Agatha's maternal instinct working overtime."

"You didn't mind, then, when Miss Farrell began showing an interest in Oliver Damson?"

"Of course I minded," said Wetheridge. "Nobody likes to get beaten out by the other chap. But I have to say, Debra had never been interested in me. We were friends, but she'd never let it get any further than that, and she told me so quite plainly. When Oliver began looming large in the scheme of things, there wasn't much I could do but wish her good luck. And I did think," he added, a trifle defensively, "that she could do much worse. Oliver's pretty sound."

"And how did you feel when Ethan Damson returned?"

"Well, I wasn't surprised she fell for him—women always did for Ethan. What was more surprising was that Ethan went head over heels for her. I'd never seen that happen before, but of course he'd been gone for a few years and maybe he'd changed. Anyway, when she asked me, I told her that Ethan would break her heart and she'd be better off sticking to Oliver."

"Was this that weekend, the weekend Ethan left?"

"Oh no. This was long before that, when the whole thing first started."

"Let's return to that week-

end," said Carmichael. "Do you remember it well?"

Wetheridge scratched his head. "In bits and pieces I do," he said. "I remember the fight—it was quite funny, that, with the Damson menfolk going at it hammer and tongs and everyone else sitting around pretending nothing was wrong. And then Ethan dashed out into the night, and I remember saying to Debra, 'Well, that's torn it, sweetie. You'll have to make your mind up now, double-time.' She looked more or less anguished, but to tell you the truth, I was getting a bit fed up with the seesaw act."

"Act? Then you thought she was toying with them?"

"Oh God, no. Absolutely not. The dilemma was real enough. See, what Debra was really looking for in life was security. Not monetary, but family. And then she met the Damsons and turned out to be sort of related to them, and there was Oliver, offering to let her join the family in a more substantial way. She loved him, she wasn't the type to say yes to any man if she didn't, but he wasn't a grand passion." Wetheridge looked glum. "After three divorces I'm not so keen on grand passions myself any more. Anyway, then Ethan came onto the scene like a thunderbolt, and he *was* a grand passion, her very

first. But Ethan wasn't any too keen on his family, and he meant to go straight away to South Africa and stay there. Debra wasn't a traveler; even if she'd had any money, she wouldn't have used it for traveling. She really didn't want to move to South Africa, especially not if it meant leaving her new-found family behind. But she was crazy about Ethan, and life at Damson Hall without him didn't seem as rosy as it once had. Thus the seesaw." He wagged his hand back and forth.

"That weekend," said Carmichael patiently. "Did you speak with her after Ethan left?"

"Oh yes. Ethan came back, you know, and talked to her, or at least he telephoned. She said she'd told him she couldn't go with him, but she was all nervous and upset. I said, 'Then why isn't Oliver running around in raptures? Haven't you told him yet?' And she said no. Ethan wasn't flying out until Wednesday—I think it was Wednesday, at least it was sometime later in the week—and she'd wait until after he'd gone to speak to Oliver. Which meant, the way I saw it, that she hadn't entirely made up her mind."

"Were you surprised when you found her gone?"

"Well, I was surprised that she hadn't said goodbye to me.

But then, I'd been recommending Oliver to her, and I thought, having finally made up her mind, she didn't want to risk my talking her out of it. I still couldn't believe she hadn't left a word for me, but when I saw the note, she had—Aunt Agatha and Oliver were just too upset to remember to tell me about it."

"You saw the note?" asked Carmichael eagerly. "Oliver said he'd torn it up."

Wetheridge grinned. "So he had. I fished it out of the wastepaper basket and pieced it back together. It was addressed to Aunt Agatha as I recall and went on for quite a bit about gratitude and Oliver and apologizing and so forth. I only really remember the part about me. She asked Aunt Agatha to tell me goodbye and said I'd been a good friend to her and she would miss me."

"And it was in her handwriting?"

"I guess so." Wetheridge frowned. "Of course, the note wasn't in the best shape when I saw it—all crumpled up and torn, and there were a couple of pieces missing. But Debra had sent me a note or two since she'd moved into the Hall, and I think I would have noticed if it was in a completely different hand."

"But if someone who knew her writing had tried to copy it?"

"I mightn't have noticed," ad-

mitted Wetheridge. "I hadn't seen a lot of her writing, and the note wasn't easy to make out, being in pieces at the time. I couldn't swear to it one way or the other." He looked apologetic. "I see how important it is," he said. "If she did write it, then Ethan had no reason to kill her, and if she didn't, he did. I'll try to think about it some more."

"If she did write that note," murmured the major softly, unnoticed by anyone but Bethancourt, "then Oliver alone had cause to kill her. But if she didn't write it, there are still any number of suspects."

Carmichael asked a few more questions, and then they called for the check, Bethancourt ordering and hastily gulping down a last cup of coffee.

At the gun shop Dan Morrison, a stout, cheerful man, was at first dubious.

"It's been fifteen years," he said. "At least. And I'm not the best record-keeper."

"You mean you're not organized," said the major, "and that everything is shoved into boxes in no particular order and therefore anything is difficult to find. I've been in your back room, Morrison, and I swear you've still got every receipt you ever wrote buried there somewhere."

Morrison grinned. "All right, all right," he said. "I'll have a

look. And if you want it to go faster, you can come help me."

To this they all agreed. Morrison was called away several times to wait on customers, but the rest of them worked steadily through the morning. Just as they were thinking of calling a break for lunch, Gibbons found what they were looking for.

"This must be it," he said, waving several pages stapled together. "It's headed 'Estimate for Alex Damson's Gun Collection.'"

"Let me see," said Morrison, taking the pages. "Yes, that's it. The handguns would have been listed last . . ." He turned to the back page. "No, no .22's. See for yourself."

Carmichael took the receipt and studied it, reading it through in case a handgun had gotten mixed in with the rifles. "No," he said at last, "there are only four handguns altogether, and the smallest is a .34. The murder weapon must have come from the Trevelyans', unless Ethan Damson bought one in London, or Jamie Wetheridge brought down his own. Could I make a copy of this, Mr. Morrison?"

Morrison waved a hand. "You can keep it," he said. "I should have thrown it out long since—I just never seem to get round to paperwork."

They thanked him and ad-

journed for lunch, a hasty meal, as the search for the gun receipt had taken longer than Carmichael had counted on and he was eager to get on to his next witness. He was also eager to leave behind his two unasked-for helpers, though he manfully concealed this as he bade them goodbye and professed himself delighted to have seen the major again.

"Now, don't forget, lad," said the major to Bethancourt as he prepared to follow Carmichael's car. "You've got my number—call when you can."

"I will," promised Bethancourt. He took a card from his pocket. "Here's my number in London, and the one beneath is my mobile phone—I've usually got it with me in the car. Ring me if you find out anything more." He paused. "What will you do next?"

"I think we'll go visit the good Reverend Allen," said the major thoughtfully. "He comes off as all fuzzy and unworldly, but underneath that stuffed animal exterior he's a piece of razor-sharp steel. As I said last night, I don't for a moment believe that rot about an ex-boyfriend fled to Australia. The Reverend may be sharp, but he's no good at lying. Not enough practice. No, he had an idea about this case and wanted to think it over before he maligned anybody. Doucet and I

will go over to the vicarage and try to winkle it out of him."

Bethancourt smiled. "Good luck with it. I'll ring you later."

"Take care, lad."

The major stepped back and let the Jaguar pull away.

"A very bright man, that," said Doucet, looking after the car. "I wonder why he's never joined the police. He's certainly keen enough on the job."

"Curious sort," agreed the major, "but very pleasant. Quick-witted. Well, let's drive back and pay a call on the Reverend, shall we?"

"By all means," said Doucet, turning back toward the car.

They met Mrs. Allen in the vicarage driveway, unloading groceries from the boot of her car. They helped her carry them inside, Doucet doing most of the work because of the major's cane.

"I'll just let the Reverend know you're here," she said. "He always enjoys a visit from you, major. Do put on some water for tea, and I'll make it as soon as I get back."

She bustled out. The major was filling the kettle from the kitchen tap when they heard her scream.

Doucet raced out, well ahead of the major and his bad knee, following the sounds of the screams to the Reverend's study. Mrs. Allen was standing

in the doorway, gazing in horror at her husband, who sat slumped behind his desk. There was a bullet hole in his forehead.

Doucet pushed past her and leant over the desk to press his fingers against the Reverend's throat. In a moment, he turned and put his arm around Mrs. Allen to lead her gently out. The major, just coming up, took in the scene at a glance and met his friend's eyes. Doucet shook his head.

"Bloody hell," muttered the major.

Bethancourt was halfway up the A286 to Haslemere, Carmichael's Rover in view ahead, when his mobile phone rang. He was surprised to hear the major's voice; he had not thought the interview with Reverend Allen would be over yet.

"Get back here," ordered the major. "Carmichael, too. The Reverend's been shot and killed."

"What?" exclaimed Bethancourt. "When?"

"An hour or two ago. He's still warm. Tyler's on his way over, but I know this has to do with the Farrell case. Get hold of Carmichael and turn round."

"Yes, sir," said Bethancourt automatically. "We'll be back as soon as we can."

He rang off and speeded up until he was only a few feet be-

hind the Rover. He honked determinedly and, when Carmichael turned round, motioned him over. He leapt out of the car and trotted over to lean in the driver's window.

"The major's just rung me," he said. "Reverend Allen's been murdered, and he wants us back there."

Both policemen looked surprised.

"Allen?" said Gibbons.

"Why on earth—" began Carmichael.

"Remember how the Reverend started to say he suspected someone, and then told us about the man who had gone to Australia? Well, the major didn't believe it. He thought the Reverend had an idea about the murderer's identity. Apparently he was right, and Reverend Allen was foolish enough to tell the murderer himself."

"Damn!" said Carmichael forcefully. "The interfering old fool should have told me," he continued, though whether Allen or the major was meant by this, Bethancourt could not tell. "You should have told me, Bethancourt."

"I know," said Bethancourt miserably. "I meant to, but I didn't see you last night when I got back, and this morning there was Jamie Wetheridge and I forgot."

"Never mind," said Carmi-

chael, softening. "It's not your fault he's dead, lad. Get in your car and follow us back—we'll make the best time we can."

The major and Doucet were waiting for them in the vicarage driveway, perched on the bonnet of a police car. They looked very somber.

Carmichael was barely holding his irritation in check. He slammed the door of the Rover behind him and glared at the older men, white eyebrows bristling. Neither the major nor Doucet appeared much intimidated.

Carmichael spoke quietly enough.

"You should have told me about the Reverend, major," he said.

The major shook his head. "Wouldn't have done any good. It must have happened between twelve and two, while Mrs. Allen was out and we were at the gun shop and then having lunch. Even if I'd told you, you wouldn't have come racing down here first thing, would you?"

"No," said Carmichael with a sigh. "I'd have finished with things in Chichester and then come, just as you did."

The major looked fierce. "I'd have been over here last night, no matter the hour, if I'd had any idea . . ." He shook his head. "Well, I didn't."

"No, *mon ami*," agreed Doucet, "it is not your fault. The Reverend Allen should not have lied to the superintendent here."

"That he shouldn't have," said Carmichael grimly. "Well, what happened exactly?"

"Mrs. Allen," said Doucet, "tells us that the Reverend went out this morning directly after breakfast, taking the car, and saying only that he had to visit an old parishioner. He returned in about an hour looking a little troubled and went to his study. Shortly before twelve she prepared a sandwich for his lunch and took it in to him before leaving to do her shopping; she was having her own lunch out. The major and I arrived a little before two and found her just returning. We accompanied her inside and found the body in the study, in the chair behind his desk. He had been shot in the forehead once and had no pulse. The sandwich," he added, "was about three-quarters eaten."

"Uh, thank you, Mr. Doucet," said Carmichael, a little amazed by this precise recitation. "That's very, uh, clear."

"I found the bullet," remarked the major. He scowled. "I had to give it to that young idiot Tyler. I'm sorry, Carmichael, but I really couldn't keep it for you. Don't worry—you've been quick getting here and I'm sure he can't have lost it yet."

Carmichael smothered a laugh while Gibbons, smiling openly, asked, "Was it a .22, sir?"

"Yes, it was."

"What's Tyler doing now?" asked Carmichael, getting control of himself.

"Mucking about the crime scene instead of sending round to check on the suspects and whether or not their hands are chock full of gunpowder residue as he should be doing."

"All right," said Carmichael, suppressing another smile, "I'll go in and have a word with him, and we'll see what we can get going."

Bethancourt did not accompany the policemen inside. He did not care much for dead bodies in general, and particularly not for the bodies of people he had known, however briefly, and liked. He still felt that he should have done something, although intellectually he knew he had not been impressed enough by the Reverend's possible suspicions to have urged Carmichael to return to the vicarage earlier.

"Hope he hurries," muttered the major.

"There is plenty of time," said Doucet soothingly.

"Time? Gunpowder residue can be scrubbed off, you know."

"Not off gloves, it cannot."

"Gloves?" said the major in-

dignantly. "It's spring, you know. Even the Reverend would be suspicious of someone who came along in this weather in gloves."

"Driving gloves," said Doucet. "Thin leather ones. Lots of people wear them."

"Oh," said the major. "Well, all right."

Bethancourt was not really listening to them. He had let Cerberus out of the car and was now leaning up against the vehicle, smoking a cigarette moodily and watching his pet explore the vicarage yard. The major and Doucet exchanged glances.

"Don't take it so hard, son," said the major, stumping over to stand beside him. "I know it's a rotten way for it to end up, but at least the Reverend's death tells us who the murderer is—and we'll get a conviction out of this, never fear. I doubt we ever would out of the other."

"I suppose so," said Bethancourt, making an effort to pull himself together. "Who is it, then?"

Both the major and Doucet looked surprised.

"But surely you see it?" said Doucet. "It is obvious now—"

"No, don't tell him, inspector," interrupted the major. "Let him work it out for himself—his mind needs some occupation just now."

"All right," said Bethancourt, going along with this effort to distract him. "What do we know now that we didn't know before? Reverend Allen went to visit the murderer this morning . . ."

"And remember," put in the major, "he wanted to keep everything quiet. He wouldn't even tell his wife whom he was going to see."

"Then consider the gun," began Doucet and the major shushed him.

Bethancourt was silent for a moment. "Oh," he said then. "Yes, I see. So Debra Farrell didn't write the farewell note after all."

"No—"

The major broke off as Gibbons came out of the house, his stride quick and purposeful.

"Tyler's in a snit," he said. "He's going on and on about Scotland Yard invading his patch, but Carmichael has put him in his place and managed to appropriate a couple of constables. We're to go to the Trevelyans' and impound the guns while he takes the uniforms to pick up Alice Damson."

Christopher Trevelyan readily admitted his sister had stopped by for a brief visit that morning and had returned again later for a lipstick she had left in the bathroom. Gibbons,

erring on the side of caution, collected all four .22's, but ballistics later confirmed the murder weapon was one of the two in the gun room.

Alice Damson, confronted at her home with Carmichael and his dogsbodies, denied all knowledge of both crimes but agreed to accompany the officers to the police station. There the right sleeve of her twinset tested positive for gunpowder residue, as did a pair of leather driving gloves later collected from the house. In the next week witnesses were found who had seen Reverend Allen's car in the Damsons' driveway that morning and who had seen Alice Damson returning at about one thirty. Another witness, walking into the village to keep a luncheon date, had seen Alice Damson's car parked at the side of the road near a little copse not far from the vicarage. She had noticed it particularly, as it was an odd place to see a car, and she had even gone over to make certain the driver had not been taken suddenly ill. Mystified, she had taken down the plate number, intending if the car was still there on her way back to bring it to the attention of the constable.

Alice Damson continued to deny everything, even after she was charged. Her husband, originally an outraged and staunch

defender, gradually began to appear rather strained as the evidence came in, and a haunted look came into his eyes. He did not attend the trial that summer, at the end of which his wife was convicted of first degree murder.

But all that was to come. On that sad and triumphant afternoon Bethancourt, returning from the Trevelyan house, waited at the police station with the major and Doucet until Alice Damson was brought in, and then waited a little longer while the wheels of justice geared up and swung ponderously into motion.

"Come and have supper," said the major. "It'll be quite good—Doucet is cooking."

"All right," said Bethancourt, stubbing out his cigarette. "Thank you."

"We're slipping, you know, inspector," said the major, helping himself to a second portion of *crêpe gâteau*. "Until today I still believed that the murderer was probably one of the Damson sons."

"It was likely," agreed Doucet. "Although Alice Damson began to look more suspicious after you and the others, Phillip, went to see Chris Trevelyan and his mother. Then we learned that Alice had been hoping to marry Oliver before he met Debra and

that she spoke with Debra after Ethan left and presumably knew her mind. We knew that Debra was upset on Saturday and retired early that night but that she was composed on Sunday—she had resolved on her course of action, and very likely Alice knew what that course was."

"But even knowing that," said Bethancourt, "didn't tell us what Debra's decision was."

"No," agreed the major. "What clinched it was this morning: Reverend Allen had clearly gone to visit the murderer, probably not quite believing she *was* a murderer. He couldn't have gone to see Ethan—he's in South Africa. And he wouldn't have gone to see Oliver because Oliver was at work and the Reverend wouldn't have dreamed of pushing in there. He was a terribly modest man, really. If he'd wanted Oliver, he'd have rung him up and asked him to stop by the vicarage."

"The Reverend did give us one clue," said Bethancourt, "but I didn't pick up on it at the time. When Carmichael told him Debra had been shot, his first reaction was that he didn't believe anyone would be so premeditated. We'd all been concentrating on Oliver and Ethan, so what he really meant was that *they* weren't capable of such a crime.

If I'd understood that and had believed in the Reverend's intuition as wholeheartedly as you, major, I would have realized it had to be someone else."

"One thing does puzzle me," said the major. "Why didn't Alice kill Debra much earlier, when Oliver's interest in her first became apparent?"

Doucet chuckled. "You are always so impatient, my friend," he said. "No doubt if it had been you, Debra Farrell would have died the day after she arrived at Damson Hall. But no. It would have been a gradual thing, nothing to give alarm at first. We do not know what Alice would have done had Ethan not returned. But when he did, her hopes were raised again by Debra's obvious passion for him. Probably in their conversations together she urged Debra to choose Ethan and believed in her heart that it would be so. Then Ethan's abrupt departure brought everything to a head. And instead of choosing Ethan, Debra chose Oliver."

"So she decided to kill her." The major nodded, satisfied. "She must have gone and gotten the gun on Sunday—on Saturday, Debra was still clearly in two minds, whatever she told Ethan."

"I think," said Doucet, "during the course of Saturday, Alice must have found out what De-

bra had said to Ethan. But you are right; it would not be enough to alarm her into murder. On Sunday, however, when Debra appeared much calmer, Alice must have realized that she was holding to her decision. Then it became imperative to kill her before she could tell Oliver that she would indeed marry him."

"In fact," mused the major, "if Jamie Wetheridge's memory is correct and Ethan did not leave England until Wednesday or even later, the timing of the murder—on Sunday—points to Alice. Either Oliver or Ethan would have held their hands until the last possible moment, hoping Debra would change her mind, which God knows she'd done before."

"Yes," agreed Doucet, frowning. "We should have seen that. Perhaps we are slipping after all, major."

"So," said Bethancourt, picking up the reconstruction, "sometime on Sunday Alice slipped back to the Trevelyan house and took the gun. She probably chose the .22 because it would fit easily into a purse. Very likely Debra watched the cricket match that afternoon—if she had decided to marry Oliver, she could hardly start off by refusing to cheer him on. No opportunity for Alice there."

"But also no opportunity for

Debra to inform Oliver of her decision," said Doucet. "Then there was dinner, and it was after that, I imagine—when it would be most likely that Debra could take Oliver aside—that Alice got to her first and persuaded her to take a walk in the garden. It was probably not difficult to do, since after Debra's previous confidences it would be natural for Alice to want to know what she had decided. And if Debra had said she was going to marry Ethan after all, a walk in the garden was all that would have happened."

"But instead she said she was almost sure she was doing the right thing by staying in England and marrying Oliver. So Alice killed her. But if this was soon after dinner, everyone would be up—why didn't they hear the shot?"

"Because the other young people were playing that dreadful music at top volume," said the major. "It would have muffled the sound of any shot effectively, even for Mr. and Mrs. Damson, who were probably in some other part of the house."

"Afterward," said Doucet, "Miss Alice had a busy night. She must have gone back to the others and told them Debra had gone to bed and that she was going, too. She had to dig up whatever Althorpe had planted most recently and dig down

several more feet to bury the body. Then she had to pack up all Debra's things and write the note. But after all, a night lasts several hours." He sipped his wine.

"It's a great pity," said Bethancourt, "that no one's suspicions were aroused at the time. The police could have found the bullet that killed Debra then, and Alice would have been caught with at least some of the dead girl's possessions. There would be no need for Oliver Damson to face the fact that he's been living with a murderer for the past thirty years, not to mention what the knowledge must be doing to their children. And Reverend Allen would still be alive."

"It would have been better that way," agreed the major, "but this way is still right. It's just not the best possible right. You have to take what you can get in this life, Phillip. D-Day won us the war in the end, but thousands of men died in accomplishing it. It wasn't the best possible answer, it was just the only one we had. And it is not possible to regret now that it was done."

"Were you there, major?" asked Bethancourt.

"In Normandy? Oh yes." He looked at Doucet. "One way or another, we've both seen a lot of action."

It was late when Bethancourt at last left the bungalow, and a light rain had begun to fall. He stood beside the Jaguar for a moment, considering, and then got in and headed the car to-

ward the London road, the windscreen wipers keeping time as he drove northward, coming at last, at about two o'clock, to his Chelsea flat and his own bed.

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the September issue.

"You gotta be kiddin'," said Detective Ryan. "Two elderly men in a retirement home plannin' to rob the safe of First Federal Savings & Loan? No way. Why, it would take them years to learn the technique."

"I'm not so sure they haven't already mastered the knowhow," said Superintendent Shaw seriously. "Think about it. Have all the yeggs who ever drilled a bank vault been caught?"

"Of course not."

"Exactly my point. If they're *really* good at it, they grow old and end up in a retirement home—like Little Valley—with nothing to do but reminisce about old times. They get bored and between them are tempted to pull one last score, one final coup. It's a logical scenario, and I wouldn't rule it out. My informant has always proved reliable in the past."

"I see," said Ryan thoughtfully. "So you think this tip isn't all wind?"

"I don't know. At any rate, it's worth checking out. I learned that six couples now reside in the Little Valley Retirement Home. Their last names are Gilson, Handel, Illitch, Jackson, Kantor, and Lambert. Since the home supplies almost everything they need, they seldom leave the grounds to stroll downtown."

"What do you have in mind, sir?"

"I want you to take a couple of men and monitor their activities for a week," Superintendent Shaw told him. "That should give us some indication of whether two of the old men there are up to no good."

Ryan and his assistants began their surveillance on Monday and continued it through Saturday. Each old couple left the retirement home on a different day of the week and visited a different place of business. In each case the husband and wife were shadowed.

At the end of the week Detective Ryan went back to Shaw's office and reported the following:

(1) No man and wife have the same first initial, so Andy is not married to Alice, Bart is not married to Betty, and so on.

(2) Elsie went out earlier in the week than did Celia. Their last names are not Gilson or Illitch.

(3) Bart and his wife were not the couple who visited the grocery.

(4) Betty went out at least two days earlier than Carl. Neither has the last name of Handel.

(5) Debby's trip downtown was at least two days before Alice's.

(6) Earl (who is not married to Celia) did not go out on Friday.

(7) Two days after Fred went downtown, a couple visited the bank. They did not transact any business. Instead, the man's eyes roved over the layout, and he jotted down notes in a little book. Two days later, Faith and her husband went shopping.

(8) Earl and his wife went out the day after the couple who visited the clothing store and the day before Betty and her husband went downtown. None of the three couples is named Handel, Jackson, or Lambert.

(9) Debby (whose last name is not Gilson) left the retirement home grounds the day after Andy. Later in the week another couple made a purchase at the candy store.

(10) Dan and his wife went out at least two days after the couple who shopped at the furniture store. Two or more days after that, a couple visited the hardware store. There the old gentleman asked for a heavy duty drill and some special bits of hardened Stellite steel—obviously not articles needed at a retirement home. None of the three couples is named Lambert.

Who are the two suspects who planned to drill the bank safe?

See page 179 for the solution to the June puzzle.

The Snake Bites Twice

Ted Rowen

Angus Macewan was still asleep in his first-class seat as the jumbo jet whistled its way to Heathrow, now only three hundred miles away. He was a big man with wavy black hair, streaked with grey, carelessly ruffled across his head and hard grey eyes now closed, his dreams causing a wide frown across his broad forehead. His nose was large but straight and his lips full over a pugnacious jaw jutting out of his sunburnt face. He wore a dark businessman's suit despite the fact that he had come from Thailand, and after so long in flight it was crumpled and his white shirt wrinkled under a bright red and blue tie. He had slipped his feet out of the soft black shoes he wore at the start of the journey, and the shoes lay on their sides under his seat. There was no one in the seat beside him, as the first-class cabin was only half full.

Macewan had been away from his London headquarters, away from the prestigious firm of Kenyon, Carlisle and Bowie, civil, electrical, and mechanical engineers, for six months supervising the construction of a massive drainage system in the plains around Bangkok. The system was designed to help the Thai villages beyond the reach of the flat plain, and to this end the government of Thailand was trying to prove to the farmers and rice growers of outlying towns and villages that they had not been forgotten. With the help of their own government, reciprocal arrangements had been made to enable the contractors, the best conglomerate in the world for this job, to move without delay. Macewan, probably the firm's best field engineer, had set the job up and seen it through the first six months and was now on his way home for a rest.

Macewan had told himself that he was tired and needed a rest, but he knew that if it hadn't been for that damned incident with Jinda Chom he would still be out there in charge of the project. He liked Thailand, and he liked the work and the women and all the friends he had made there, but he had been ordered home, and he wasn't looking forward to the interview with Sir John Kenyon when he arrived at the head office. He knew that nothing could be proved against him; after all, the damned bint had led him on, hadn't she?

After all, she wasn't a kid, and she'd responded with a passion that had surprised him at first. It was only when he got really serious that she started to struggle, and he had a job to hold her. She was thin and small but wriggled and kicked, and as the struggle increased, Macewan wanted her more, but when she started screaming, he had to hit her to stop the noise. He cursed inwardly. He must have hit her too hard, and when she banged against the wooden rail, it snapped, and over she went. Funny she didn't yell going down into the cutting. Must have been unconscious. But it had put a stop to his job out there for a while and it would be some time before they would allow him back. Thinking back on the incident, he now realized how lucky he had been, but it had put a stop to his wanderings for a while.

Just then Macewan awoke with a jerk and for a moment stared around him, wondering where he was. Then he sat up in the aircraft chair and put his hand to the right side of his neck. He stared unbelievably at the blood that came away on his fingers and stained his white collar. He had been awakened by a sharp bite, and he looked around at the other passengers to see if they were looking, for he felt sure he had made an involuntary cry as he was bitten. He pressed the button for the stewardess, who was at his side in a moment, immaculate in her Thai uniform and the epitome of consideration as she smiled at him, showing gleaming white teeth and cherry-red lips.

"May I help you, sir?" Then she saw the slight trickle of blood on Macewan's neck. "Oh."

Macewan, never pleasant when dealing with underlings, snapped, "I hope you can. Something's bitten me on the neck. Ruined the goddamn shirt. Thought you didn't have any bugs on your fumigated, air-conditioned airplanes." He scowled. "Well, don't stand there. Get me something!"

The girl, still smiling, examined the tiny mark on Macewan's neck and looked puzzled. She said, "There are no insects in here, sir, but I will get something."

She hurried away and returned with a first-aid kit, expertly swabbed the cut with disinfected pads, applied a small round plaster to stem the bleeding, and stood back. "Were you asleep when it happened, sir?"

Macewan glared at her. "Yes, I was. What the hell has that to do with it?"

"I thought maybe you involuntarily scratched yourself, sir."

Macewan was about to blow his top when he saw the other passengers now watching with curiosity, and he subsided.

"No, I didn't scratch myself. You've let something come aboard that's not on the passenger list." He gave a slight smile and slumped back in the seat, dismissing the girl.

Three hours later Macewan was at home in his London apartment. He had taken a long bath, fortified himself with several whiskies, and prepared himself for the interview with Sir John Kenyon the following morning. He knew he was the best man they had, particularly in tackling difficult projects. For ten years he had sorted out the company's problems in many parts of the world, and his contacts were very useful. Sir John knew this, too, but it was always politic to be prepared.

Before he settled down for the night, Angus Macewan studied the bite on his neck. He was sure he hadn't scratched himself; therefore, it must have been an insect bite. He had heard that rats sometimes invaded the cargo holds of aircraft, but he had no knowledge of parasites or vermin in passenger cabins. He frowned as he studied the wound in the magnifying shaving mirror.

The cut was about a half inch long, and it seemed to have a jagged or serrated edge. This edge also seemed to be folded over, making the skin thicker around the perimeter, and the cut looked nasty and inflamed. It had stopped bleeding, however, and he thought this must be a good sign. He took a clean plaster from the medicine cupboard, carefully covered the cut with it, and retired to bed.

Sir John had greeted him affably enough and, after going over the details of the irrigation scheme on the edge of the Bangkok plain, had brought the conversation round to the reason for Macewan's recall.

"There was," he said, "a rather disconcerting phone call, followed by a letter, from a minor government official, a Mr. Lung Chom, who suggested there had been some impropriety by yourself in connection with his daughter Jinda, and that you might, in some way, have had something to do with her unfortunate accident. Could I hear what you have to say, Macewan?"

Macewan sat up in the comfortable chair facing Sir John's desk, a beautiful rosewood piece supporting just two wooden trays of correspondence, a brass desk lamp, a blotter pad, and a calendar. It was a big desk as befitted the head of such a large company, and the office in which it was housed was spacious and beautifully, if sparse-

ly, equipped. Although situated in the heart of London, the room was quiet and the atmosphere relaxing. Sir John's secretary knew, as if by telepathy, his every need, and Macewan knew there would be no interruption while he and Sir John were together. He shuffled his big feet in the thick carpet and automatically touched the plaster on his neck. He hadn't found it easy to shave that morning.

"Yes, Sir John, certainly. I'll be glad to tell you what happened." He waved his hand nonchalantly as if the matter were of little importance. "I had been to a party that night at Chom's place. About once a month there was a get-together of local dignitaries and staff from the company. They are, as you know, both social and business gatherings." He smiled. "We all know you can learn a lot from these shindigs, and you hear information that may be of use in the future. After all, we've done a lot of work out East, and with luck there'll be a lot more to come."

He saw Sir John frown and read the signal. "Well, Chom's daughter, Jinda, had become friendly with me. In fact, she had visited the site with her father several times, and when they stayed overnight as they sometimes did, I'd taken her out for a meal and a drink. Chom seemed to have no objection to this."

Sir John looked at Macewan and thought how easy it would be for any girl to fall for such a rugged character as Macewan. He'd known him for a long time. The big, handsome Scot was undoubtedly a brilliant engineer, and his only flaw, if it could be called that, was his attraction for women.

Macewan resumed. "Anyway, the party became a bit of a bore. Jinda and I took a walk down to one of the artificial canals." He smiled, man to man. "Well, it was romantic there, with the moon over the jacaranda and banana trees, the smell of amaranth blossom and the warmth of the night, and we walked to where we were doing the next excavation." He frowned, recalling the incident. "There was a fence at the side of the track, and below that was a steep drop of, oh, perhaps a hundred feet to the bottom of this cleft, through which the canal was to run. The drop was rocky, and as I was explaining how the job was to be done, Jinda suddenly threw her arms round me."

Macewan spread his hands and widened his eyes as he described the unexpectedness of the girl's move. "I know we were fond of each other," he continued, "but her sudden play for me startled me, and the force of her embrace pushed me against the fence. I naturally turned away from the drop to face the road, and the girl lost her

grip on me and went over." His sunburnt face was a picture of remorse as he looked at Sir John. "My God, Sir John, I've never felt like that before, and I've been in some tough spots. She didn't shout or scream, and after a hell of a struggle I managed to get down to her but she was dead. Her neck was broken by the rocks."

There was silence for a while, and Sir John poured another whisky. "What happened then?"

Macewan shrugged resignedly. "Of course I went back and the services came. Lung Chom did not say much at the time, but later he accused me of killing his girl, though God knows why I would want to do that. The police came and there were the usual reports, and I went back to the contract until you recalled me." He looked worried for a moment. "I may have to go back for the inquest."

"Well," said Sir John, "there may be more questions to follow, but I've put the necessary lawyers working on your behalf both here and in Thailand, and we've had a report from them on Lung Chom, who seems to realize now it was all an accident." He got up from his desk, walked to the window, and looked out over London's busy streams of traffic. "Just for now, Angus, I want you to go down to Docklands to a job we're finishing there. I think you know it, but we could do with a bit of help. Johnson will show you the drawings and layout, and you can give him a hand till things quiet down over there." He turned and saw Macewan fingering the plaster on his neck. "What's the matter with your neck, Angus?"

Macewan explained that he had been bitten and that the wound didn't seem to be healing very well, and that he couldn't understand how it could have happened on an aircraft. Sir John was sympathetic and suggested he go to see a specialist on tropical medicines in case it was something he picked up in Thailand. "No sense in taking chances, Angus," he said. "I'll get Mary to make you an appointment for ten o'clock tomorrow. She'll give you the address." He smiled. "Got to look after our top men."

Feeling somewhat better, Macewan shook hands with Sir John, and the two men murmured a few platitudes and Macewan called in to see Mary, who had already received the necessary instructions from her superior. Macewan then renewed a few acquaintances in various offices, received directions about the Docklands project, and went off to see the site engineer, Johnson, at the Docklands site.

Professor Ockenden turned away from the raw mark on Macewan's neck and stood back. Macewan sat watching him as the doc-

tor spread his hands. He spoke quietly, but Macewan thought he detected a note of doubt in his words.

"Well, that's all we can accomplish at the moment, Mr. Macewan," he said. "I'll just put something on that for you and see you tomorrow." He turned away, fiddled with something on a gleaming medical tray, and returned with a small plaster on which he had put a thin layer of some pastelike substance. As he fastened the plaster he said, "Whatever it is, it looks very angry."

Macewan stood up. "What do you think caused this, professor?"

Ockenden sighed. "Sir John told me you've just returned from the Far East and outlined the work you were engaged in there, but despite my knowledge of that part of the world I've never seen anything exactly like this." He paused. "If I hadn't known where you were when you felt the bite, I would've said for certain it was a snakebite. But as you were thirty thousand feet up in the air at the time, it seems unlikely."

"It's damned unlikely," said Macewan emphatically. "I've had some near misses with snakes, but I've never been bitten."

The professor opened his laboratory door. "Well, Macewan, we've done all we can until the lab finishes its work. We've taken swabs, slides, and X-rays and put you through the computer, so to speak, and that covers all tropical diseases. I'll let you know the result." He waved his hand as Macewan walked out. "But please stay in London in case I need you quickly."

Macewan acknowledged this request and left for the Docklands, but Professor Ockenden became a man of action. He buzzed through to his secretary and said, "Mary, please get me Dr. Quiraishi in Calcutta. You have several numbers, but he will most likely be at his home now. If not, try the university and the other numbers you have."

He waited impatiently in his office but was rewarded after a ten minute wait. Dr. Quiraishi came through quite clearly.

"Quiraishi! How nice to hear your voice. How are things with you?"

The professor listened as his friend Quiraishi briefly acquainted him with present events at Calcutta University and at his home, and then the doctor asked if he could be of help.

"Yes, Quiraishi, I think you may be able to do something for me. I'd like you to fly to Bangkok immediately if you can. Postpone your present commitments for a few days, and visit a man named Lung Chom. He lives near Bangkok and is a minor government official. I

will send you by wire complete details of this very strange case. I think it might be right up your street as they say."

Quiraishi chuckled, and as he listened, he thought of how pleasant it had been to work with Ockenden, his old chief and mentor. After a few more pleasantries he assured the professor that he would immediately investigate the matter of the curious neckbite. Ockenden felt a little more satisfied, knowing that the young Indian doctor had agreed to help.

Dr. Quiraishi found the home of Lung Chom after he booked himself into the Shangri-La Hotel in Bangkok. A few simple inquiries over the phone had enabled him to contact Chom, who had politely agreed to see the young doctor. He had no knowledge of Professor Ockenden, but upon hearing the reference to Angus Macewan he had agreed to the meeting with Quiraishi.

Dr. Quiraishi had been to Bangkok several times before and knew a few medical men in the area, but he respected the urgency of Ockenden's request and kept his thoughts to himself on the matter in hand, which he needed to handle tactfully. As the taxi took him to Lung Chom's house, he wondered why the natives called Bangkok the City of Angels. He had also visited Los Angeles, and the only similarity he could see between the two cities with the same names was that they were both filled with the same very rich people and the same very poor people, with perhaps the latter predominating.

After a young maid had shown Quiraishi to a terrace overlooking the rear gardens of his bungalow, Lung Chom greeted the Indian with courtesy and charm. On the peaceful, warm verandah with its potted orchids and lavender bushes, overlooking lush green lawns dotted with tamarind trees and bordered with pink, red, and yellow roses, it was hard to visualize any connection with the alarming, angry gash on Angus Macewan's neck.

When the subject came up, after some hesitancy by Dr. Quiraishi, Lung Chom turned to him and smiled.

"I am not a devious man, Dr. Quiraishi. From what you have told me about your estimable friend Professor Ockenden, you are seeking the truth about the wound on Angus Macewan's neck." Lung Chom's dark eyes, set in a yellowish skin, were steady and fearless. "I know the story, doctor, that Macewan told to his superiors, and to the police, but believe me, it is lies." Here his small body sagged a little, and he fiddled with the creases in his cream shantung suit.

Sorrow filled his eyes. "Angus Macewan tried to rape my daughter Jinda, and when she resisted him, he threw her into the ravine."

"But—" Quiraishi hesitated.

The little Thai stared at him, "Yes, doctor, I know I wasn't there, but Jinda was my daughter. She trusted everybody, and I know she would never, never have thrown herself at a man, even one she knew, like Macewan." He took another sip of his lime drink. "I had the man investigated, of course, and found him to be a bully and a rake. Oh, I know, also a charmer, but he has been involved in several unsavory escapades before and cannot be trusted." He stared across the bright, sunlit lawn. "He murdered my daughter, so I have authorized him to be executed."

Dr. Quiraishi was astonished at the way Lung Chom expressed himself over such a serious matter. It seemed all the more unusual considering the serene scene in which they spoke. Here he was, enjoying a cool drink in the beautiful setting of Chom's garden, and his host calmly says he has ordered a man executed. He swiveled his eyes in astonishment, but Chom's face was unreadable.

"Perhaps I didn't hear that last statement correctly, Mr. Chom. Did you say that you had ordered the death of this Angus Macewan? But how did you do that? Mr. Macewan is in England. And you surely cannot be certain that he murdered your daughter, as—" he spread his hands "—with due respect, you were absent from the scene at the time."

Chom smiled. "Dr. Quiraishi, I can see that you are an honest if—you will pardon me—ingenuous person when it comes to dealing with human nature." He looked around the garden before he continued, and Quiraishi saw with a shock that the older man, although apparently calm, was greatly troubled by what he had done. Chom went on. "I had a private investigation into the condition of my daughter after her death, and it was established that she had been attacked by this man, who wanted his way with her against her wishes. All the signs of the struggle and so-called fall led me, and others, to believe that she was thrown into the chasm to her death." He clenched his small fists. "And it was to no avail. She would not have taken action against this engineer, but he was drunk and has a nasty reputation when he is in that condition."

"But the police! Why didn't you pursue this through the courts?"

Again Chom smiled. "Now you are showing your naivete, Dr. Quiraishi." He spoke quietly although there was no one else in the vicinity. "The company that Mr. Macewan works for is part of a very

powerful conglomerate that has connections with the men of our government who fix deals with men of the British government. They therefore do not want any scandal or adverse publicity to interfere with their contracts, so if I had taken that course, I would have gotten nowhere." He frowned. "I am telling you this, doctor, because no one can stop the course of action I have taken even if they want to. It is too late. The death sentence has been put upon Macewan for his misdeeds, there will be no proof to show anyone killed him, and the process cannot be stopped."

Strange feelings stirred in Quiraishi's mind as he listened, but he took some slight hope in the way Chom had spoken. There did seem an overtone of regret when he said nothing could stop the death process. Quiraishi said carefully, "I take it you are talking of some kind of witchcraft?"

"Yes," replied Chom, "I am." He leaned close to Quiraishi, who was thinking of stories he had heard in his childhood but had never believed. "Even now Mr. Macewan is suffering increasing discomfort from the bite on his neck. This wound will grow bigger, he will continue to suffer more, and in a few days' time he will be dead." He smiled without humor at Quiraishi. "Even your eminent professor of tropical medicine will be able to do nothing, and the very fact that he has sent you here means to me that he knows he can do nothing. I am sorry, Dr. Quiraishi. If I could tell you more, I would. But nothing can stop what I have started."

Quiraishi thought for some time without speaking. Chom refilled their glasses and watched some birds fluttering around a mango tree.

"Mr. Chom," he said finally, "if you feel any sort of regret for what you have done—and I believe that you do have some reservations about something that should rightly be left to higher echelons than we—if you do have the slightest doubt, would you tell me where to find the person who is doing this for you so that I may, for the sake of my medical mentor, try to reverse the procedure you have started?"

Chom thought for a long time before answering, and the doctor could see that it was causing him some distress. At last he came out of his reverie.

"Because you are obviously an honorable man, doctor, I will tell you where you may find this fakir I have employed." He stabbed a finger at Quiraishi. "I warn you, you must be very careful. Do not ever underestimate the powers of these people." He waved his hand. "Of course there are fakes, but this one, his name is Simbat, is no

fake, and he is old and very wise. Take great care not to offend him." He held up his hand before Quiraishi could protest. "I know you are a gentleman, doctor, and would not intentionally deride this person, but I cannot emphasize too much the danger you may be in when you reach his village." He paused again. "It is true that I am troubled and I wish you well, but I have little hope for you or for Mr. Macewan." He stood up. "Come inside and I will show you where to go."

After Dr. Quiraishi returned to the Shangri-la Hotel, he put in a call to Ockenden in London. He knew the professor would be asleep but would be expecting his call. There was the inevitable delay, but finally he reached the professor, who was soon alert.

"I have to see a fakir as soon as I can find him," he reported. "This may sound extraordinary to you, professor, although you will no doubt have heard of such witchcraft."

He then gave the professor all the details. When he had finished, Ockenden surprised him by saying, "Yes, Quiraishi, I half expected something like that." He paused. "In fact, I've identified what's wrong with Macewan."

Quiraishi was surprised. "And what is that, professor?"

"He's been poisoned with snakebite. As far as I can tell, it's the venom of the krait, or karait as they are called in Thailand. The poison seems to be increasing; and although Macewan, who's a strong man, refuses to believe he's in serious trouble and is still at work, I'm afraid for him, and I'm therefore not surprised at what you say."

They both fell silent, and then Ockenden said, "Now, take care when you see this fakir, Amil. I don't want to lose a good friend. If you feel any danger, get out. If the man is willing to accept money to reverse this process, pay him anything, but don't jeopardize your life. Ring me as soon as you can."

Amil Quiraishi saw to the practical item of getting a plane to Chiang Rai and made arrangements at the hotel to retain his room until he returned. He packed a few necessities and fell asleep for a few hours. The following day he checked into a hotel in Chiang Rai and found a guide with a car who would take him to the village of Lahu, where he hoped to meet the fakir called Simbat.

At first the roads were reasonable because this area had been part of the notorious Golden Triangle, once one of the world's biggest sources of opium, but soon, after losing the way several times, they followed rough tracks. Chom had told the doctor that Simbat could speak English but he had to leave it to his guide to

question villagers about how to get to Lahu (the village was named after a local tribe). After passing a few moderate-sized bamboo plantations and coconut groves they entered the edge of a jungle. The going was hot and stifling, and Quiraishi was bothered by prickly heat.

They passed numerous Buddhas, some of metal and others of wood, some tilted and some on their backs. They passed mango trees, poorly sown rice paddies, and a few bamboo huts where a pitiful cottage industry in metal, cloth, and leather goods was evident. But at last they reached the outskirts of Lahu. The guide stopped and said he wasn't going any farther. Whether or not he had heard of the fakir Simbat Quiraishi didn't know, but he was surprised when the man found a policeman in the village.

After the usual greeting and introductions and the formalities of showing his credentials, Dr. Quiraishi, with the verbal assistance of his guide and the practical help of several hundred rupees rather reluctantly accepted because the doctor had forgotten to change his money into bahts, persuaded the policeman to take him to the bungalow of the fakir Simbat. The guide remained at the policeman's hut while the policeman took Quiraishi to the edge of a small clearing in a heavily wooded area. They had left the main village, passed the communal well and some small huts of bamboo, shooing a buffalo out of the way, dodging chickens, and smiling at a few women tending herb gardens, before they reached this quiet clearing. It was surrounded by palm trees and jacarandas and mango trees and banana trees all fighting for space. Next to the fakir's small bungalow was the typical cone-shaped wat. The policeman explained in jerky English that this was Simbat's personal wat and that he would wait for Quiraishi at the edge of the clearing. Quiraishi, hatless and hot in the jungle humidity, strode forward carrying a light cane with a silver handle. He politely stepped onto the fakir's verandah and stood waiting in the open doorway. The door was open, and suddenly Simbat appeared.

Quiraishi gave the typical Indian greeting, hoping it would not offend the guru, and showed his professional card to Simbat, who salaamed in return and ushered the doctor inside the bungalow.

It took the doctor a little time to adjust his eyes to the half darkness. There were windows in the bungalow, but it was gloomy in the one room. He studied the old fakir, who was clad in the saffron robes of a holy monk, brown feet clad in sandals. His small, shaven head seemed shrunken on his narrow shoulders. His face was wrin-

kled, but his dark brown eyes, though sunk deep in his head, were clear and alert. He gestured with his skinny arms to the rattan mats on the floor, as there were no chairs to sit on, but Quiraishi shook his head.

"I have come," began the doctor, "at the request of a friend of mine in London who has a patient in his care named Angus Macewan—"

The fakir held up a thin brown hand. "I know why you are here, Dr. Quiraishi. I have to tell you that things of which you know little are at the moment working against the man you have mentioned and that I cannot stop the process. It has been found that this guilty man would not be punished by the usual authorities, and it has been my duty to see that justice is done."

Quiraishi was startled to hear all this, without preamble, and was horrified when he saw on a shelf in the almost bare room a little row of figurines or effigies meticulously crafted in terra cotta. He knew the skill of these people in the crafts of metal and pottery, but a glance at the figurines showed the exceptional quality of workmanship, and he was shocked a moment later when the fakir took from the shelf the unmistakable facsimile of Angus Macewan. He held it out to Quiraishi, who quickly shook his head and backed away a little.

Simbat said quietly, "Have no fear, doctor, we have no quarrel with you. You are on what you call a mission of mercy, and no doubt you have been told to offer me money to build a new wat or to distribute amongst the poor, but before you make such an offer, I must tell you categorically that the curse on Macewan is permanent."

Again he held out the effigy, and this time Quiraishi leaned forward to look. Sure enough, on the right side of the neck there was a cut, and the cut had been bleeding. He shuddered a little and looked at the tiny shriveled figure before him.

"But how did you . . . er . . . create this effigy when you have never seen Macewan? How do you know you have got the right man?" Quiraishi stared at the small orange figure in front of him; then caught himself wondering what he had expected a fakir to look like. After all, a fakir was a holy man, and the exceptional ones had exceptional powers. He realized he had been asking unanswerable questions.

"The mark, on his neck . . ."

The old priest smiled, which just seemed like another line of his face. He moved nearer the window. "Come, I will show you."

Quiraishi moved close to the fakir and examined the figurine

again. Judging from the photograph of Macewan that Ockenden had sent him, the effigy was a remarkable likeness. The little fakir pointed with a thin brown finger at the neck.

"See, I have made a cut here and injected it with the venom of a snake. Each day I add to the venom, and in a few days' time, Macewan will be dead and justice will have been done."

But even as he spoke Quiraishi raised his eyes at a slight movement on the windowsill, and his heart missed a beat. He stood rock-still, his right hand tightening on his cane. He tried to keep his voice quiet and even.

"Simbat," he said in little more than a whisper, "stand quite still. There is a snake on your windowsill."

The snake, a blue and yellow patterned krait about two feet long, lay across the glassless window, its flat head swaying from side to side very slowly and hypnotically. Simbat stood rigid, holding the effigy of Macewan in his skinny brown hand. He had his back to the open window and therefore could not see the snake, but he remained calm, and apart from the snake's malicious head, there was no movement in the room. The hot silence added to the tension as Quiraishi very slowly raised his malacca stick and prepared to hit the snake. Simbat stared at the doctor; only the fear in his deep brown eyes betrayed his courage.

Then the snake struck. The movement was petrifyingly fast. There was just a colored blur, and the fangs sank into Simbat's neck just as Quiraishi brought the stick down with vicious force. He slashed at the snake again and again as it dropped outside the window.

For a moment the old fakir stood as still as his statues; then he slowly crumpled to the rattan-covered floor of his bungalow. The effigy of Macewan slipped from his dying hand and dropped hard and heavy to the floor. Quiraishi cried out as, on impact, the head snapped off the body and lay staring up at him like some accusing devil. Quiraishi stepped back but then remembered his profession and hastened to the dying fakir.

But it was all over. The man's resistance was low, and the venom had done its work. The doctor checked for signs of life, but there were none.

On his way back to Bangkok Quiraishi pondered on what had happened and wondered whether, with the death of the old fakir, there would be any change in Macewan's condition. The recent events had affected him badly. He had had great difficulty in per-

suading the constable in Lahu to go to the fakir and to look outside to find the snake he had beaten to death. He made the constable, with the aid of the guide, note the time and circumstances of the death, and made sure he would notify his superiors. Quiraishi noticed that none of the villagers would go near the fakir's house, and both he and the policeman had refused to touch the effigy.

There was one curious feature that worried Quiraishi, and he knew he had to get Ockenden as soon as possible. The neck of the effigy, attached to the head, had started to bleed again.

As Dr. Quiraishi was driven away from Lahu towards Chiang Rai, his astute mind replayed again the events of the past few hours. What the death of the old fakir meant he did not know, but slowly, as he carefully ruminated over what had happened, the thought came to him that there was still a remote chance that Mac-ewan, if he was not already dead, could be saved. He was sitting in the back of the old Citroën and leaned forward so the driver could hear him above the noise of the engine.

"How long will it take you to reach Chiang Rai?"

The driver shrugged and nodded at the rutted track. In a few weeks, when the monsoons came, this road would be impassable; now the rock-hard ruts made driving tricky.

"An hour when we reach the main road, maybe hour and one half from here."

Quiraishi sat back and thought. When the snake had struck, it had been just at five o'clock. That meant it had been ten A.M. in London. An hour had passed; it would now be eleven. That meant that if they reached Chiang Rai in another hour there should be plenty of time to contact Ockenden. But would they be able to find Mac-ewan?

The young Indian doctor spent the next hour urging his guide to greater speed, but it was an hour and a half before they pulled up outside his hotel. Quiraishi overpaid the man and immediately placed a call to Ockenden at his surgery in Harley Street. An hour later he was still waiting for a reply call. Impatient, he fumed at the switchboard, but the operator insisted there was a delay through Bangkok. Quiraishi then called his own surgery in Calcutta. Although that also took time, he managed to get his secretary to ring London for him and gave the number of his hotel in Chiang Rai.

Another hour had elapsed before Ockenden finally came on the line, and a rather agitated Quiraishi rapidly told him what had happened. Professor Ockenden was despondent.

"Oh God, what can we do now?"

"Professor, what time is it in London now?" Quiraishi asked.

"Two fifteen P.M. Why?"

"Well," said the doctor, "I don't know much about these things, but the old fakir died at five P.M. here. Allowing for the time difference, it is just possible that Macewan may expire at that time, so if you can get hold of him in the next couple of hours you may be able to do something."

Ockenden was puzzled. "I . . . yes, Amil, but what can I do? The man's as stubborn as a mule. Although he's not well, he insists on working, and I think I can find him. But if I get him to come to the surgery, I can't do anything. The snake antidote seems to have had no effect."

"I too don't know what we can do, professor," Quiraishi said, "but perhaps there is a chance that with the death of the fakir the spell or whatever it was will be broken. If we can keep Macewan safe till five P.M., I think . . ."

The professor said, "Right. I'll get him to come down here if I can find him and lock him up somewhere safe. I can't see that doing any good now, but I'll ring you after five o'clock London time and let you know what has happened."

There was a pause, and then Quiraishi said, "Professor, without trying to make things more difficult, I have to tell you that when the head broke off the effigy, the neck started bleeding again."

Ockenden put down the phone, and Quiraishi heard him groan just before the disconnection.

Unfortunately, Ockenden could not trace Macewan on the Docklands site, and frantic calls to and from Sir John Kenyon yielded no result until one of the men at the site reported to the project engineer that Macewan was back.

Sir John tried to keep calm, but a glance at the clock showed it to be four forty-five P.M. With all that Ockenden had told him, Sir John was sick with worry and impotence but calmly ordered the man to find Macewan and personally escort him to Harley Street.

The site manager was told and soon found that Macewan had gone up to the fourth floor of the unfinished office block. He was in the cradle carrying some important piece of machinery. The manager raced over and waved his hands at the cable controller in his cab, but he couldn't make him understand that he wanted the cradle back on the ground. Then he saw Macewan looking down and waved frantically as his assistant climbed up to the cab to instruct

the lift operator. Macewan had his head well over the side of the cradle looking down when he heard a shout from above. For a second he froze, then tried to move out of the way. The horrified watchers saw a falling piece of angle iron, moving like a boomerang, hurtle downwards, slice straight through Macewan's neck, and, in a welter of blood, crash heavily onto the ground below.

In the awful silence that followed, the solemn boom of Big Ben told that it was five o'clock.

SOLUTION TO THE JUNE "UNSOLVED":

Carl Parks, the banker, killed Maria Roper, his lover who wanted out of their relationship.

FLOOR	HUSBAND	WIFE	PROFESSION	SPORT
5	Earl Roper	Maria	editor	sailing
4	Bert Queen	Karen	contractor	fishing
3	Don Tabor	Laura	doctor	swimming
2	Andy Smith	Olive	auditor	tennis
1	Carl Parks	Norma	banker	golf

Memories

Wanda Jones

Old Lady Hawkins was starting to get on my nerves. She'd been in my kitchen bawling for an hour or so, just taking a breather now and again to wash down a piece of red devil cake with a cup of coffee. Traffic in and out of the kitchen had been heavy all morning; and I finally gave up trying to keep the floor mopped what with everyone tracking in and out. The side yard of our little farmhouse was filled to overflowing with pickups and trucks along with the firetruck and the hearse from Dedham. Two cars from the county sheriff's department were parked across the road on the shoulder.

Jake and Mattie Slokum's youngest boy Ned wandered off yesterday afternoon. When he hadn't come in by dark, his folks commenced looking, and finally panicked and called the sheriff's office for help.

Volunteers scoured the creek-banks and hills behind our place for most of last night. Me and my husband farm the little place I inherited from my ma. It's just across the creek from the Slokums, so we were more or less in

the middle of all the activity. I had spent most of last evening pouring coffee and dishing up soup and sandwiches and cake and pie until I was ready to drop, and then started in again this morning at first light.

The last thing last night somebody suggested to the sheriff that Perry Harkness, the only diver in Copperton, ought to search the quarry up near the abandoned copper mines to see if maybe little Ned had fell in and drowned.

The mines played out way back before the second war and have been boarded over ever since. At one time a halfhearted effort was made to drain the quarry at the base of Copper Hill, but finally folks just went off and left it like it was, stagnant, dirty, and no telling how deep. The only good thing about it the last few years is that it looks so scary and smells so bad that none of the local kids are even remotely tempted to swim there any more. I've heard the whole place is overgrown and wild now. It's been nearly twenty years since I was last up there, and I don't have no plans

to go back. There's a shortcut to Bancok from our place up past the quarry, but we never use it and nobody else does neither, far as I know.

Well, Perry showed up first thing this morning decked out in his rubber suit and stood out in our yard checking his gear, giving the locals a show. I've never cared much for Perry. We went all through school together, and he was never what you might call kind. But that's another story.

All last evening, while I served coffee and washed dirty cups, I never dreamed they'd search the quarry. When it was suggested, I just thought to myself that it was probably so murky down in that pit that Perry wouldn't be able to see a thing, but of course he was all caught up in his starring role and made his dive at first light. Wouldn't you know he found the car right off. Trust Perry. I guess it had to happen sooner or later, but I can honestly say I was taken by surprise.

Everybody come back to the house talking loud and excited, and the sheriff used our phone to call for a truck with a winch 'cause Perry said he could tell there was at least one skeleton in the front seat of the car.

I guess you could say I'm the quiet type, and not being too much for idle comments, I didn't

say anything through all the commotion. (I did notice, though, that little Ned seemed to be forgot.) I'm not much to look at, and never was, and that makes you grow up silent for sure.

Even as a little girl, when most kids are at least cute, I was too skinny and tall, taller than all the other girls and most of the boys. Perry and others like him just naturally called me String Bean and Tree Top and a lot of other things I don't care to remember. What was worse, my hair was so blonde it was nearly white, and my grandma that lived with us (my ma's mama) wouldn't let me cut it. She always piled it up on top of my head just like she wore hers. I thought it made me look more like a freak than ever, but I was a little kid so I let it go.

As if the misery of my looks wasn't enough, my brother Toby, who was nine years older than me, was as handsome as a movie star. His hair was blond and thick and curly and he was big and broadshouldered, and half the girls in town (and some of the married women) followed after him all the time. Grandma didn't like Toby much. She said he was always trying to get something for nothing. I loved my grandma a lot. After Pa chopped a tree down on himself and wound up crippled, Ma had

to help with the outside work, and most of Grandma's care fell to me, young though I was.

Grandma had a stroke when I was about nine and ever after didn't get around much. But she could use her hands, and there wasn't nothin' wrong with her voice—you could hear her yelling clean down to the barn when she wanted something, which was pretty often, I guess.

You'd have thought that with Pa crippled up and Ma doing most of the chores Toby would have pitched in and done his part, but he didn't. He mostly hung out in the poolhall at Dedham and always seemed to have money in his pocket, but he never gave none to Ma and Pa, hard up as we was. He *said* he played snooker with anybody that would take him on, and bet on himself. I don't know if that was true or don't care.

I can't remember when Toby ever treated me with anything but contempt, calling me, Squirt and pulling my hair or tripping me whenever Ma and Pa wasn't looking. I learned early on to stay out of his way and usually went to the barn with my pups when he was around, which wasn't that often.

After her stroke, my grandma's whole life was her room at the top of the stairs, but she made the most of it. We didn't have TV in those days, but she

had a little radio, and she crocheted and tatted and I used to sit and watch her and listen to her tell stories about when she traveled with my grandpa, who was a riverboat gambler. Grandpa was twenty-five and Grandma was fifteen when they married, and according to her, they traveled the first two years as father and daughter because she was so young. After she got her growth, so to speak, they sometimes traveled under different names, pretending not to know each other, and she shilled for him just to get the crowd worked up and make them start to gamble. Every time she told the old stories, I'd make her explain what "shill" was and how she did it, and ask her wasn't she scared.

One of my favorite stories was how Grandpa got accused of cheating one night and got put off the riverboat onto a sandbar. Grandma got so excited she jumped off the boat and like to of drowned what with all the clothes she wore in those days.

Then Grandma would always have me dig under the bed and come out with her old shoebox, and she'd put it on her lap and sit looking down at it with a wistful smile on her face before she'd open it up and unwrap all the tissue paper and pull out the necklace.

Grandma never wore jewelry

except the thin old wedding band that Grandpa gave her when they married, and I never saw her put the necklace on, but we spent many an hour looking at it and holding it and talking about it. She'd turn it this way and that before the light, and the reflections from the clear, bright stones would dance across the faded old walls. Sometimes she'd fasten it around my neck, and I'd prance around giggling and singing and she'd watch and clap and laugh her old lady laugh.

"Are we rich, Grandma?" I'd ask, and she'd answer, "Rich as can be, child. Rich as can be." Then she'd look real sad and say, "This necklace is yours when I go, and I don't mean just to remember me by. It's a hard life waiting out there, and I want you to have somethin' nice to help you through it. Lord knows you ain't got no looks." Here she would take my long face between her gnarled old hands and look at me real sorrowful, and I'd look back, just as sad, playing my part to the hilt. "Well, time to put our treasure back in safekeeping!" she'd say, and I'd fetch the box and help her wrap the necklace up careful in its tissue paper, and she'd watch me put it back under the bed.

A couple of times when I was high-steppin' around Grandma's room wearing the necklace I no-

ticed Toby hanging around, sitting on the stairs, listening to us talking and playing. I'd scream, "Toby's sneakin' around listenin' again, Grandma!" and she'd commence to holler, "Git on outa here! Leave us be!" Toby would get up and stroll on back to his room, making sure we knew by his slow, casual swagger that he was leaving because he was ready, not because he'd been told to.

We'd both glare at him until he was out of sight, and then I'd slam the door and we'd go on with our games.

Toby disappeared the summer I was eleven. Went away and never came back. Of course, Tammy Rose Hawkins disappeared the same night, so nobody thought too much about it. Toby had somehow managed to scrape enough money together for the down payment on a big old black car that had been rusting at the back of the local used car dealer's for two years or more. It made a mighty racket and more often than not black smoke poured out of it, front and rear, but the louder it was, the better Toby liked it. He drove that car with his foot flat on the floorboards and on rare visits home scattered cats and dogs and chickens (and me) in all directions, scaring us all half to death. Ma swore her hens only

laid half the eggs they should have after Toby got that car.

Toby took me for a ride in his car one time; I never went again. I should have known better, but what eleven-year-old can resist when her big brother offers to take her for a spin? He told Grandma he'd take her, too, carry her down and put her in the back seat snug as a bug, but she wouldn't hear of it. His eyes was glittering when he said it, and I guess she saw that. But not me. I picked up my old dog Pepper and climbed right in.

We took off with a jerk that slammed me back against the seat and caused Pepper to let out a yelp at how tight I'd grabbed him. Well, Toby threw us both around in that big old front seat, and I banged my head on the dash and hurt my arm on the door handle when he squealed around the corner headed for town. He made a screeching U-turn at the drive-in just this side of Dedham and headed back home, me screaming and crying at the top of my lungs. I'd let go of Pepper by that time and was hanging on with both hands as we swayed and rocked down the old dirt road. Once I accidentally kicked Pepper where he was scrunched up on the floorboards at my feet. When Toby finally roared up in front of the house, I was shaking so I couldn't hardly get

out of the car and Ma had to run out and help me. She commenced to scold Toby, but he paid no mind as usual. After I finally managed to stumble out into the yard, he scooted over into the passenger seat and kicked poor old Pepper out the door, slammed it, and took off for town, laughing fit to bust.

Grandma had dragged herself up in the bed as best she could and was trying to see out the window. She hollered, "Is she all right? Bring her up here to me; what in the world was that boy thinking of?" and a lot more stuff I can't remember.

Pa was standing on the porch leaning on his cane, and when me and Ma got to the top of the porch steps, he said quietly, "Hannah Lee, are you all right?" and of course I was crying and carrying on, and he just stood there shaking his head. Ma took me on up to Grandma's room and put me in bed with Grandma, got a wet cloth and washed my face, and finally calmed me down. I slept there that night, twitching and jerking and breathing in funny little gasps, the way kids do when they cry too hard.

Toby stayed away all night and came home the next morning like nothing had happened. I was coming out of the barn carrying Pepper, and I stopped dead still when I heard the car.

Toby jumped out and flipped a casual hand at me. "How ya doin', Squirt? Git over your car ride yet?" and then he laughed that nasty laugh of his and went on in the house.

Pepper had commenced to writhe at the sight of the car or Toby or both, so I just held him tighter and told him we'd take a walk down the road to the meadow. I held him until we were out of sight of the house and then let him down to scamper along beside me. I mostly kept to the shoulder of the road, but Pepper crisscrossed back and forth, chasing bees and butterflies, and I gradually relaxed. We were headed for a meadow about a quarter of a mile from the house where there was shade trees and usually a nice breeze. Pepper and I went there a lot even though it didn't belong to us. I never did hang around Toby much, and after that car ride I decided me and Pepper would make ourselves scarce when he was around.

The night Toby disappeared I had taken a pallet and a pillow and climbed out my bedroom window onto the front porch roof, thinking I might get a little air. I heard Toby's car turn off the highway and come roaring up the road, but it stopped before the turn leading up to the house. I laid there real still peeking down over the roof, and

pretty soon I could hear scuffling and giggling and then Toby and Tammy Rose Hawkins came up the road with their arms wrapped tight around each other and staggered into the yard heading for the side door of the house. I couldn't believe Toby'd be dumb enough to try to sneak Tammy Rose up to his room, but I wasn't about to wake Ma and Pa to tell them. Well, Pepper must have been trying to sleep by the side door because I heard a yelp and then an awful whomp, and Pepper yelped louder and took off up the old mine road, whimpering and coughing.

Pepper was a farm dog, and I knew that night that he'd probably be all right out there by himself, but I couldn't have slept for worrying whether Toby'd really hurt him this time. I crawled back in the window and waited until Toby and Tammy Rose crept by my door on their way to his room.

They stopped outside Grandma's room and I could hear them whispering, but they went on and I slipped out and down the stairs and set out to look for Pepper without even putting on my shoes. I was quiet as could be as I sneaked out the kitchen door and down off the porch. I headed up the mine road, calling softly to Pepper. Sometimes Pepper fooled around up in

there by the old mine and the quarry, but I didn't like it and never went there to play. That night it was dark and spooky, with the moon in and out of the clouds, and I was scared, but I was worried about my dog.

My memory of that night has become hazy and muddled as memories are inclined to do. I remember the sound of the car racing up the hill behind me. And I remember turning just as it rounded the bend below—it was coming so fast I couldn't think and I was caught by the lights, like a jackrabbit, and couldn't move. I remember the screech of the brakes and a yell from inside the car, and as Toby spun the wheel frantically to the right to avoid hitting me, I could hear the high, shrill scream of the girl with him. The old car plowed through the brush and weeds at the side of the road, then sailed out over the quarry rim, hit the surface of the water with a big splash, and was gone before I knew it.

I could hear Tammy's scream in my head long after the car had disappeared. I stood there for awhile, then walked slowly over to the pit, afraid to get too close. I listened, but there was nothing but night sounds gradually starting up again, and I turned and went on back down to the house and darned if Pepper wasn't right there on the

front porch. I took him in the house with me, and we both went on up to my room to bed.

It wasn't until the next morning that I found out that Grandma had died in the night. Ma came in and woke me. She was crying and drying her eyes on her apron, and she said it looked like Grandma had tangled herself up in the bedclothes and somehow turned her face into the pillow and suffocated. I tore away from her and ran to see, but she and Pa had already straightened the worn old body out and smoothed the bedclothes and folded the hands, and Grandma looked soft and peaceful.

Everyone said what a shame, such a sorry thing to happen, but I sat tearless and hard-eyed throughout the days that followed, thinking of the way Toby and Tammy Rose had come tearing up that hill like something was chasing them.

The upset of Grandma's death and the funeral kind of took over our lives after that, but every now and then Ma would say something like, "I swear I don't know what has come over Toby, he's surely heard about his grandma by now, why don't he come?" Or, "When that Toby gets hisself back here, he's gonna get a piece of my mind!" But of course Toby never came.

Ma had me clean out Grandma's room and told me to take anything I wanted because she knew Grandma would have wanted me to have it. The box with the necklace was gone as I had known it would be. I never mentioned it to anyone.

When Ma told me that everything Grandma had was mine if I wanted it, she added, "Lord knows she didn't having nothing that was worth much. Just her pictures and her Bible and that old necklace you two used to play with that your grandpa won for her that time at the carnival."

I wasn't surprised, and I wasn't disappointed. Young as I was, I had known what was make-believe and what wasn't. My life had been made a lot richer by my grandma and her games with the necklace and the love I've never forgot. I never told anyone the necklace was gone, and no one ever asked about it.

Ma finally accepted that Toby was really gone instead of just staying away like he did sometimes, and besides, the whole town knew that Tammy Rose was gone, too, so they just put two and two together. After about six months Ma really began to fret about not hearing from Toby, but what could she do? The years went on, and she and Pa stopped mentioning it. It

wasn't as though Toby had ever added much to our family life after all, and he sure never did any work around the farm.

Pa died about seven years after Grandma, and Ma a couple of years after that. My ma didn't have much schooling but she was smart, and after Pa died, she went to a lawyer and made a will. She left the farm to me, cutting Toby out altogether. She told me about it after she did it and said if Toby ever showed up he couldn't make no trouble for me.

I've said I'm not much to look at, but that didn't keep a couple of men from town from trying to court me, just to get their hands on the farm. I had no time for them, but when Del came along, why we just hit it off so good that we was married in six months and it's worked out real nice. We've got two boys, and they're going to be fine men like their pa. Del ain't much to look at neither, and naturally he's shorter than I am, but I couldn't have done better and we've built ourselves and our boys a pretty good life.

I smiled to myself as I took the sweet-smelling layers of cake from the oven and replaced them with the bread I had kneaded down earlier. Everyone was already pretty sure about who it was in the car Perry found when he dived into the

quarry looking for little Ned. There wouldn't be enough left of their clothes or anything to identify them, but old Mrs. Hawkins hasn't never heard from Tammy Rose neither, so it wasn't too hard for everyone to figure.

A couple of the women who came over to help wanted to take me up to the quarry so's I could be there when they dragged the car out, but I told them I'd rather not see it. They said they understood, but of course they didn't. I finally convinced everybody that I was fine by myself, and they all went up to watch, taking Mrs. Hawkins with them, thank the Lord.

By the time they got the truck with the winch up there and everything set up, the whole town was there but me, including little Ned's folks because by that time little Ned had turned up all right. He had been down near the railroad tracks at the edge of town and crawled up into an abandoned freight car to play. He played till he got tired and fell asleep, and when he woke up, he just headed on home. A neighbor too old and decrepit to make it up to the quarry found him walking down the

deserted street looking puzzled and told him all about it. I heard later that Ned was real put out that he'd missed the start of it all, but he hightailed it up to our place pretty quick so he didn't miss too much and of course was mighty proud at the part he'd played.

Even Del and the boys couldn't stay away from the quarry and all the excitement. Del and me, we're real close, and I don't have many secrets from him, but I've never told him about that night and never will. I've kept it to myself all these years, and I reckon it's best it stays that way.

I stood in my homey kitchen and peeled potatoes and thought about the night Toby and Tammy Rose disappeared. Can you imagine how I must have looked standing there on the road in the shadowy moonlight in my long white gown? Tall and skinny, with my near white hair piled on top of my head? When the car lights hit me, I'd been so startled I'd just stood there, still-like, not moving a muscle, even when the car had come right at me. Can you imagine what them two in the car thought?

The Girl Who Would Be Queen

DeLoris Stanton Forbes

Betty Petty! June recognized her right off. Even after forty-five—no, forty-eight, or was it forty-nine?—even after all those years she recognized her. Right off. Even after all these—could it be fifty—fifty years? Really? Time flies? Tempus fugit? Whatever, right off she recognized Betty Petty. Strange. Very strange. But, right off!

What made it even more strange—in addition to all those years and all the rest of it—was where she saw her. The last place on earth where she'd ever expect to see Betty Petty. In a window. In a shop window in Fairland. Fairland, Florida. In an antique shop window in Fairland, Florida. Fifty years later. At least.

So she turned on her good heel and went in. A tall, halo-haired lady behind a glass case said, "Good mornin'. Nice mornin', isn't it? Is there somethin' I can help you with or are you just browsin'? We just love browsers, don't we, Caroline?" At which point a second lady appeared from behind a curio case, a younger, shorter, pink-haired version of the good-mornin' lady.

"Take your time, honey," trilled Caroline. "We got lots to look at. Me and Edith will be glad to answer any questions."

She smiled, said, "Thank you. It seems you have a catholic collection."

Edith said, "Well, we do have some religious items," while Caroline, looking somewhat puzzled, added, "There's an old family Bible. I don't know if it's especially Catholic or not. We're Baptists."

June thought maybe she should explain her use of the word catholic, decided against it, answered, "How nice." She used her ivory-headed walking stick to negotiate the twists and turns of the shop, a niche here, another niche there, as she gave cursory glances at the china and crystal, the Depression glass and the overdressed dolls, the one real and six imitation Hummels, and the dusty plastic and/or silk flower arrangements in handpainted vases. Occasionally she came across something rather nice, but for the most part the antique shop—what was the name of it—she read the words backwards on the front plate glass window, RETTEB SI DLO, deciphered it

as OLD IS BETTER, and smiled to herself. Old is Betty, she thought. Betty Petty. If only you knew, Edith and Caroline. If only you knew.

Returning to the entryway of the shop, she mused over a teddy bear in a little old rocker and a modern Italian lavabo (what sort of Florida home would have a use for an Italian lavabo?), then almost as an afterthought asked, "How much is that picture in the window?" Strains of an old song, a silly old song, "How Much Is That Doggy in the Window?," came to mind, took her back (but not so far back), made her smile again.

Edith bustled out from behind her glass case. "Picture? What picture do you mean? Oh, that photograph. That's a real old photograph. It's got a date on the back, 1936, I reckon that's a real antique all right . . ." Nineteen thirty-six? Was that when it was? She'd been off, truly off, it was sixty years. Sixty years since . . . sixty slippery, multicolored, forgettable, and unforgettable years . . .

Her thought was broken by Edith's soft Southern voice going on and on. ". . . But I reckon it's the frame that's valuable. Mahogany and gilt, real gold leaf it looks like, nice and heavy, too, and in perfect condition. You could put almost any picture in that frame, you don't have to have that photograph, I reckon it wouldn't mean much to anybody that didn't know any of the young ladies, it just came to us that way. I reckon that frame's worth . . ." Edith removed the framed picture, peered at the back of it, called, "Caroline, can you make out the price on this nice frame? It's your writing, and you write so tiny. Caroline's got this nice handwriting, you see, and she makes her figures so neat I put her to writing most of the price tags in our special code. Caroline, this lady's real interested in this mahogany and gilt frame. Come decipher how much the price is for us, will you, honey?"

Caroline deciphered the price to be thirty dollars. June refused an unspoken but proffered opportunity to dicker, said, "I'll take it," paid the money, declined an offer of wrapping ("It'll take a few minutes, but some cardboard and paper'll protect that nice frame . . ."), tucked the frame with the photo under her better arm, and left.

The retirement village van was waiting on the designated corner. She was early, it wasn't scheduled to leave for twenty minutes, but she'd had all the shopping spree she could take. She hadn't expected to buy anything at all, had come only because she was tired of looking out on the manicured lawns and carefully tended flowerbeds that rimmed the "best condominiums that retired money can buy." Somewhere out there were people who weren't so well cared for,

people who complained and complimented, who laughed and cried for good reason, not just because they were old and bored. As she was.

Propping the photograph on her lap, she stared at it. There were seven girls in the picture. Girls. That was the right word because they were all in their teens, those girls back in the days when young ladies were called girls. Let's see, could she name them all? Start with Betty Petty (no mistaking Betty Petty, no forgetting Betty Petty); next to her was . . . Elsie. Yes, Elsie Newman! And next to Elsie, that was . . . Phyllis Conway. Yes, Phyllis Conway! Dear memory, she told herself, you haven't deserted me after all, you've just been playing possum. Playing possum. A phrase her mother used to use. Gracious, she was reverting.

Reverting. So, okay, Betty, Elsie, Phyllis, and . . . dark hair with bangs, saucy looking, what was her name, started with an *M*, Maxine, Maxine Gerber. Betty, Elsie, Phyllis, Maxine, and next there was Coralee Gracy, it was getting easier now, and by Coralee's side was Susie Orton and last but not least, the seventh girl was one June Blythe. All seven wore bathing suits, suits of the thirties not quite so totally modest as one might imagine. Betty's had a slit down the front with tiny buttons to show cleavage had Betty boasted cleavage, which she didn't. Across her chest Betty wore a ribbon; the words on the ribbon spelled out MISS RIVERSIDE PARK, 1936. The ribbon was blue, June knew that even though the photo was in black and white, and the words were not easily discernible, but she didn't have to read them to know what they said, she knew them by heart.

She heard herself repeating Edith's mahogany and gilt, real gold leaf frame speech when she got home, where Theresa was waiting with tea and homemade scones. Theresa could be a nuisance at times, but nobody could cook like Theresa, which was why she put up with her. Nosy was Theresa's middle name, she treated June more like her backward child instead of her aged but quite capable employer. Where did she buy the frame? What was she going to put in it? Where was she going to hang it? How much did it cost? A pretty penny Theresa would bet, those antique dealers they know a sucker when they see one, why, her cousin Jessica who collected Avon perfume bottles, she went and paid twelve whole dollars for one of them, and there wasn't even any perfume in it . . .

"I don't believe I'll have tea today, Theresa. Bring me a scotch and soda, please. Just splash on the soda, and when you've done that, you can have the rest of the afternoon to yourself. Don't look at me

like that, I just feel like a little nap, and liquor makes me sleepy. And don't fuss, Theresa, I feel perfectly fine, and if there's anything that will make me cross, it's a lot of mother-hen clucking . . . Thank you, now run along, I believe your soaps are on. You can go watch them all the way through for a change."

Betty Petty. Back in her life, how very strange. She'd have to write to Coralee, she still had her address. She assumed it was current. Coralee had been on the fiftieth reunion committee for her high school, had sent a form invitation a few years back with instructions to RSVP to her "a.s.a.p. at this address." And Coralee might know where the others were, too . . . they'd all been classmates. Except for Betty Petty.

Would Coralee want to hear about Betty Petty? Maybe no, maybe yes. But she'd understand June's sense of the bizarre, and there was no one else she could think of who'd share her feeling. My God, how long had she nurtured that sense of unfinished business, ugly loose ends stained, just faintly stained, with a red (now pale pink) splotch of guilt that wouldn't quite fade away . . . She finished her scotch and soda, made another before she gathered pen, letterhead, and lapboard, began to write.

Dear Coralee,

Glance at the signature on this letter and say heavens to Betsy, that was your favorite expression back when we went to school together and we were best friends. Maybe you don't say heavens to Betsy any more, but I'm sure of one thing, you'll be surprised to hear from June née Blythe now Beresford. And you'll be even more surprised when you hear why I'm writing.

I ran into Betty Petty today.

In an antique shop window. In a photograph. Of the seven finalists of the MISS RIVERSIDE, 1936, beauty contest. You and I, Elsie Newman and Phyllis Conway, Maxine Gerber and Susie Orton and—of course—Betty Petty!

It was a shock. I'm sure you'd share my reaction had it happened to you. There I was, making my way down the street on a typical hot Florida day wondering why I'd come out of my comfortable, air-conditioned condo, and there she was, staring at me in the window, wearing that banner across her front, smiling that self-satisfied smirk. Well, I bought the photograph, and why I bought it is somewhat of a puzzle. I just couldn't leave her—us—standing there in our bathing-suited innocence (we were innocent then, weren't we?) for

people to stare at or not stare at—I'm not sure which is the most insulting reaction—I just couldn't leave it there, so I bought it, and I don't know how it got there, and I don't know what to do with it now that I've got it. Maybe you'll have an idea?

For the time being I'll put it in the back of my walk-in closet (I don't think my maid is so thorough as to poke around in the very back) and hope for an answer to this letter. If you are in contact with any of the others, you might check with them if you have their addresses. I have this curious urge to communicate. But please, for Betty Petty's sake, write and tell me what you think. It's been a long time and I've been a lot of places and have had a great many friends; but I think of you very often and wonder if you think of me.

Sincerely,
June Blythe Beresford

By the time she'd finished and sealed the envelope she truly was sleepy, so she nodded in her chair and dreamed of times long ago. She was still dreaming when Theresa came to wake her by turning on the lamps in the twilight. Betty Petty stared up at June from the sideboard where she'd left her. She roused herself and took Betty and the others with her as she went to shower and dress for dinner. She hid them behind her suitcases, she wasn't going anywhere soon, she knew. Unless . . . homesick? Old people don't get homesick. Homesick is for children, and old people don't really have second childhoods, do they? They just get senile.

Elsie Newman died a while back, wrote Coralee. Someplace down South, she thought, maybe that's where the picture came from, do you reckon? Phyllis Conway lived in Maryland. Her daughter reported that Phyllis was in a nursing home there, suffering from Alzheimer's. Maxine and Susie were still around, they came to the reunion. Maxine was fat and arthritic, Susie looked as though she'd had her face lifted—more than once.

She, Coralee, was plugging along pretty well, but her husband Harold—did June remember Harold Dawson? He was the class photographer for the school yearbook, always carrying a camera and snapping pictures. Come to think of it, maybe he'd been the one to take the picture, she wasn't too sure but she kind of remembered June saying, Coralee, get Harold to come around with his camera, and when we're all in a line, he can take a snapshot, won't that be a killer-diller? She kind of remembered that, did June recall? Well,

she and Harold had been married fifty-three years last September, but he hadn't been so well lately. Diabetes. Trouble with his feet. The doctor said he'd have to watch him carefully. Sometimes they have to have their feet amputated, you know, and Harold is scared to death that that might happen to him.

She wanted to know all about June, what she'd been doing all these years and why hadn't she come to the reunion, it had been a wonderful experience . . . Funny thing, though, she didn't remember any Betty Petty right off. Although the name seemed kind of familiar . . .

"Theresa," said June, "pack our bags for a trip. I'll make the arrangements."

"A trip? Where are we going?"

"Back," she told her. "Back to visit Betty Petty."

"To visit . . . who?"

"An old . . . acquaintance, Betty Petty." Into the telephone she said, "I'd like to make reservations for two. To Little Hill, Kansas. First class."

Coralee was recognizable. June could see past the sagging jowl and the thinning hair to the pretty, pert girl with the sharp tongue who'd been her best friend back in high school. Coralee didn't recognize her. June had to tell her who she was, which was disappointing in a way but hardly surprising. This tall, thin, silver-haired duchess type who went by the name of Mrs. G. Elliott Beresford bore little resemblance to lanky, awkward June Blythe from the almost-but-not-quite wrong side of the tracks. "My God," exclaimed Coralee. "I can't believe it! Look who's here, Harold. June Blythe. You remember June Blythe! I'm so surprised to see you here in Little Hill, June. How long has it been . . . my God, I can't believe it."

"You have my permission to pinch me if that will help," said June. "I hope I've not come at an inconvenient time."

Coralee laughed, June remembered that laugh, more of a contrived giggle than a true laugh. "Of course not! Come on in. I was so surprised to get your letter after all these years, and now here you are! Harold, isn't it absolutely mind-boggling? That's what our granddaughter says. Mind-boggling. Do you have any grandchildren, June? Here, sit down there. Harold has to have that reclining chair, it's his feet, you know. I wrote you about his feet, didn't I?"

June allowed that Coralee had indeed written about Harold's feet.

She had a vague recollection now of Harold with his ever-present camera; he'd been an ordinary looking, darkhaired young man with nondescript facial features. Now he was an ordinary looking gray-haired old man with a limp gray mustache over obvious dentures. He looked puffed up as though someone had pumped helium gas into his body through some centrally located orifice. He wheezed, "Nice to see you, June," then sagged against his chair back. From behind him Coralee shook her head sadly.

With smiling voice she said, "How long you going to be in town? You'll find it's changed a lot, you won't recognize parts of it. I'd sure like to show you around, but I'm kind of tied down here—" with a jerk of the chin she indicated Harold "—but maybe I could get away one afternoon . . ."

Before June could answer, Harold came to. "Beresford," he wheezed. "Any relation to that famous writer fella? The one that did all the historical novels from all over the world?"

"He was my husband," said June. "He died two years ago. In an auto accident."

"Oh my, how sad." Coralee gave her head a sympathetic shake, followed it with a sharp glance. "I noticed you were walking with a cane? You hurt in the same accident?"

"Somewhat." If you call two crushed discs in the lower spine and a fractured leg somewhat, but she didn't intend to go into that. "I'd like to get in touch with some old friends, have a little luncheon get-together. On me, of course. You said you had the addresses of Maxine Gerber and Susie Orton. I looked in the phone book but didn't find them listed. No doubt they have married names."

"Oh my, yes. Do sit down, June. Would you like some iced tea? Or lemonade? I make lemonade for Harold without sugar, he says he likes it that way but I can't imagine . . . anyway, you can put sugar in yours."

June looked around, chose an aged armchair from the roomful of well-used furniture, sat on a loose spring without reaction. "Nothing, thank you, Coralee. My maid is out in the car, and I don't want to keep her sitting out there too long. Maybe you could give me those addresses? And how about the day after tomorrow for our small reunion, will that be convenient?" With a smile at Harold, "Sorry to say no men at this little get-together, Harold. It's a hen party I have in mind."

Out in the rental car Theresa was wiping her brow with a tissue when June returned. "Even with the air-conditioning on full blast,

it's still hot out here," she complained. "I hope you got what you came for, it sure took you long enough."

June ignored her, placed herself behind the wheel, and began to drive. Funny thing, she hadn't been in this city for years and years, but she could still find her way. "Where are we going now?" Theresa wanted to know.

"To Riverside Park," said June. "To the zoo."

But she couldn't find the zoo. Round and about she drove with Theresa complaining all the while until at last she stopped and asked a pedestrian for directions. The young woman with the baby stroller looked blank. "Zoo?" she said. "There isn't any zoo around here. There was one once, I think. But they moved it. Ages ago. It's out on . . ."

But June wasn't interested in the new zoo. It was the old zoo that mattered, the old zoo with its barred lion cages and the circular pit filled with alligators, inert alligators for the most part. Kids used to throw things at them to get them to move, which resulted in a sign that read DO NOT THROW ANYTHING INTO THE ALLIGATOR PIT and, in smaller letters underneath, ANYONE DOING SO IS SUBJECT TO PROSECUTION.

That sign had been there the night of the beauty contest. There had been a full moon that night, an unbelievably bright moon, and June could still see the words now as then, ray-lit, visible for moments, then hidden by shadows from a cottonwood tree. DO NOT THROW ANYTHING INTO THE ALLIGATOR PIT . . .

"Well, I hope you're satisfied," Theresa grumbled. "Can't we go eat someplace? I'm starving."

June took the photograph sans frame to the luncheon in a large woven tote bag (from a trip to Greece). Coralee, carefully dressed in a silk brocade suit that had been in style a few years back, was the first to arrive. Her face was fully made up, and she looked more like the old Coralee than she had two days ago. Maxine was next. She had put on weight as Coralee had said. She wore her hair in much the same way as she had sixty years before, curly bangs and ends turned under. Its color wasn't the same, that was the major difference in Maxine's hair. Red it was now. A most peculiar shade of auburn.

The last to arrive was Susie Orton (now Susie Dolby, according to Coralee, "Do you remember Leonard Dolby? He was a tall, thin red-head. On the basketball team. You should see him now, he's just a

big fat baldheaded blob!") Evidence of the facelift (or lifts) described by Coralee showed in the taut skin of Susie's face. When she smiled, some facial muscles smiled, others stayed solemn. Ah, my pretty beauties, thought June. She said, when they were seated and had been served before-luncheon drinks, "Coralee says she doesn't remember Betty Petty."

Maxine choked on her drink, daubed at her chin with a napkin. Susie's "Betty Petty!" was a near whisper. "Well, I kind of do remember her now." Coralee followed her amended statement with her trademark giggle. "I must be getting old and forgetful. Whatever happened to Betty Petty, I wonder. Goodness, that girl was homely. Never could understand why she kept entering all those beauty contests—Miss Little Hill Country Club and Miss Stockyards and Miss Riverside Park. She had some kind of delusions of grandeur, I guess."

"Oh, she's dead." June took a long swallow of her scotch and soda. "She's been dead for sixty years. Here . . ." and she removed the photograph from her bag, laid it face down on the table top. "Here we were. The night before the beauty contest. Remember? The night we played the big joke on Betty Petty? Remember how we laughed, no, I guess how we snickered is the better phrase. We thought it was just about the funniest joke ever."

"Well," Maxine studied the picture, "it was kind of funny. My goodness, did I ever look that young?"

"That ribbon should have been on me, that's *my* ribbon. Well, not my ribbon, but one like it." Susie looked once and looked quickly away. "I'm the one that won, I was the real Miss Riverside Park that year."

"You were a real pretty girl," Coralee told her.

"Were," said Susie sadly.

"You still look real good," Maxine assured her.

"Considering," Coralee interjected.

"Yes," Susie sighed. "Considering. Oh, isn't it awful getting old?"

June smiled. "I can think of something worse. Not getting old. Like poor Betty Petty."

"Could I have another drink before we eat?" Maxine wanted to know.

"Of course. Let's all have another," and June signaled the waiter with a wave of the hand. "Then you can tell me about Betty Petty's dreadful demise. I wasn't here, you see. My parents were moving to Texas. The very next morning. So after Harold took that picture—

yes, Coralee, it was Harold and his camera—I went home to pack. Quite disappointed I was because I wouldn't be there for the final judging the next day. I did think I could win, you see. I thought for sure I would have been chosen Miss Riverside Park 1936, but then we'll never know, will we? So after we posed Betty Petty in our homemade ribbon, what happened? Ah, thank you, waiter. Don't bring our food just yet, we may have another. Isn't anybody going to tell me? What happened?"

Coralee got pink-faced. As June recalled, Coralee flushed in anger. Coralee said, "How in the world would we know? How would I know? I had a date with Harold. We went off right after. I never saw Betty Petty again. Ever."

"Listen, June," Maxine's eyes glittered, "are you accusing us of something? Sounds to me like you are. What makes you think we're to blame . . ."

"Is that what she thinks? June, is that what you think?" Susie's face showed no emotion, but her voice shook slightly.

"I don't know what to think, that's why I'm asking. But you girls were here, you girls were right here and you should remember. How did Betty Petty wind up in the alligator pit?"

No one answered, all she heard was the murmur of voices from the next table. She'd chosen this restaurant for the privacy allowed by its table arrangement.

Finally Coralee said, "The alligator pit?" as though she'd never heard of it before.

"Come, come, ladies, don't play mickey-the-mope with me. It was in all the newspapers, even the Texas newspapers. The body of a young woman was found in the alligator pit the very same day you won Miss Riverside, Susie. It took some time to identify her because she'd been . . ."

"Why are you doing this, June?" Coralee seemed close to tears. "We have no idea. She could have jumped into it for all I know. She was a silly young woman. Having a normal conversation with her took some doing. You remember, Susie, she told Elsie she could communicate with another planet, do you remember Elsie telling us that? She told Phyllis she used to dance naked in moonlight and she didn't care if anyone saw. And she told me how she was destined for greatness, that people would talk about her everywhere, people who didn't even know her . . ."

"They did that, all right. It was in all the papers and on the radio.

Betty Petty. Big news. Big, big news." Maxine sounded downright sullen. "Where's that waiter, anyway? I'm dry."

June considered Coralee's question. "I think it's always been on my mind. Down deep. Under things. A nagging sense of guilt. Because we played that trick, made fun of her that way. Maybe she realized it somehow. Maybe she deliberately climbed down . . . I used to think that, and that thought made me feel like a monster, a heartless monster. You had it right, Coralee, she had delusions of grandeur. She was mentally crippled, and we reacted cruelly. Then that picture showed up. In a place where it shouldn't have. And I decided it was a message. For me. So I'm here to find out. Who is responsible for the horrid death of Betty Petty?" She leaned forward, said softly, "And I intend to find out—no matter how long it takes. That's a promise."

There was silence, and someone loudly sucked in her breath before Coralee said slowly, said solemnly, "June, are you all right? Are you sure you're not going . . . having mental hot flashes?" The three aging faces wore the same accusing expression even when she smiled, told them she'd come on too strong, apologized, resumed her role as gracious hostess. Best, she decided, to tone things down, keep her quest on a less serious level, lest she be judged a modern day Don Quixote and was that what she was actually doing, tilting at ghostly windmills? In search of—what? A blameless past? A conscience white as innocent snow? Innocent snow? Innocent snow maiden? Innocent June? But it was only a joke, we were only funning, it was just that she didn't belong, Betty Petty . . .

"So how'd your fancy luncheon turn out?" Theresa wanted to know when June returned to the hotel.

She shrugged. "We've grown apart, the four of us. They're strangers."

"That's to be expected," said Theresa. "Now what? Back to Florida?"

"No. Not yet. I think I'll skip dinner tonight, Theresa. Go out if you like, or have room service. As for me, I'll go to bed, I'm exhausted. And I have detective work to do tomorrow."

"Work? What kind of work? What? Did you say *detective* work? What do you mean, detective work? What's with you anyway? If you want my opinion, I think we'd better get back and visit Dr. Bennett, you've been acting pretty peculiar lately . . ."

Wearily she waved her silent. "Go on with you, Theresa. I'm beat. We won't be here much longer, I promise."

Divide and conquer, some famous writer said that. Shakespeare? Probably. Seemed like Shakespeare said just about everything. Shakespeare and the Bible. She began with Maxine, Maxine who liked her liquor; Maxine who could be turned into a toper-tells-all with a few (well, not so few) gin-tonics. It turned out that Maxine remembered Betty Petty almost as well as June.

"I don't know who had the idea first, maybe it was Phyllis. She was always thinking of practical jokes, wasn't she? Anyway, I do recall that you made the banner, June. And Coralee volunteered to get Harold to come and snap a picture. I think it was Elsie who typed up the 'official announcement'—she took typing in a business course while the rest of us learned things like Latin and calculus. Did you ever find any need for Latin or calculus, June? Seems to me we'd all been smarter to take a business course like Elsie . . ."

"Where'd you go afterwards, Maxine? Who were you dating then? Your husband? What's his name, Hanrahan?"

"Don. Donald Hanrahan. May he rest in peace. No, I didn't even know Don then. I was running around with Cliff Trent then, remember him? He was a big guy, a football lineman. Hey, how about another round, June? To get the show on the road, huh? Where did you say we were going? Back to the old high school? Suppose they've still got our pictures hanging in that 'rogues' gallery' in the main hall? I haven't been there in God knows how many years, makes me want to break down and snivel when I look at myself then, God, I was so pretty. And so young! You know, there's a sixteen-year-old Maxine Gerber still living inside this fat carcassh right now, like today. And they say when you're old that your sex drive dies. I don't know about you, June, but as far ash I'm concerned, don't you believe it! Don't chu ever b'lieve it, honey . . ."

"Where did Betty Petty go to school, do you know? She wasn't with us. Maybe she went to East High School, do you suppose?"

"I don't think sho. She wash older, seemsh to me she was older. Lishen, June, if we're goin' off, maybe I should get shome fresh air, whaddaya think, huh?"

"So you were with Cliff, and Coralee was dating Harold, and Susie was going with Leonard Dolby back then . . ."

"No, no. I don't think Sushie wash ole Len's lady then. Cliff said the basketball team was passing ole Gerry Jenson around then, you know, one guy and then another, she had some reputation, that gal

... I don't think Sushie was sheeing anybody right then. I don't think. You'd have to ask her."

Oh I will, June promised herself. I surely will.

They found the graduation photos still hanging in the high school hallway. Maxine had been right about one thing, it was easy to get teary-eyed if one was the type to get teary-eyed when one reflected on the youth and the purity of eye. Purity of eye—hah! It was easy then, that expression. Even if the devil lived inside.

"I put in a call to Dr. Bennett," Theresa told her when she got back to the hotel. "He said there's a good man a few miles away in Topeka you could see, said he'd call him and go over your case with him. His name is Dr. Gupta, says he's Indian and real sharp, so I called him and made an appointment for tomorrow. Ten A.M. Don't make any other arrangements . . ."

"You really have a lot of nerve, Theresa. You're not my nurse, you're my maid, just remember that. I don't want to go to Topeka, and I don't want to see any doctors, especially any Indian doctors, all war paint and feathers, no doubt. Call it off. That's an order!"

"Not a Native American Indian, an East Indian doctor. If you were feeling yourself, the name Gupta would have told you that; there must be hundreds of them in India. Where are you off to now?"

"Off to see the wizard," she snapped and left. The phone book had listed one Petty, that one Petty was named George, and whether George was related to the deceased Betty was an unanswered question that required a visit. An unannounced visit. She hoped fervently that George Petty was in residence.

He was. He was a tall, thin, stooped, very old man with sunken cheeks and deep-set dark eyes with pale-ringed pupils. As she recalled, Betty had been dark-eyed. Age-wise he could have been her father? No, her uncle, maybe? Her older brother? June told him her name, added, "I'm here on a visit. I was a friend of Betty's. A long time ago."

He blinked as though he were trying to bring a Betty to mind, and she thought, he isn't a relative and if he isn't connected, I've come to the end of this trail. But then he said, "Come on in, Ms. Beresford. I haven't thought about Betty in a hundred years, I reckon. Come in and have a glass of iced tea, it's mighty nice of you to come. My wife didn't have a lot of friends, least friends that I knew about. But I figured she was kind of hiding me, ashamed of me maybe, so she never let me meet any of 'em. I'm right pleased to know you."

She followed him into the little house, a typical Midwestern house of the twenties, shaped like a shoebox with a front porch and small rooms that followed behind one another. The front room was furnished with an overstuffed sofa and two overstuffed chairs, the fabric dark in color. June was reminded of the living room setup in her parents' house except their house was bigger and their furnishings were carefully chosen. Something new had been added to George's living room—a television set. Somewhere along the way George had joined the twentieth century.

"When were you and Betty married?" she asked over her glass of too-sweet iced tea. "She didn't mention you. I suppose that was because the beauty contest was for single girls."

"The beauty contest?" He connected bushy eyebrows in a scowl. "You knew Betty in that dang bathing beauty show?" He set his own tea down on a chairside table with a thump, caused a splash, an ignored splash.

June leaned forward, felt like Riding Hood's wolf, "the better to see you." "It was so sad the way that turned out. So very sad."

He fell back against the chair cushion, a balloon losing helium. "I tried to talk her out of those dangfooled things, but she wouldn't listen to me. She wouldn't listen to me at all. 'Betty,' I told her, 'you're too old for this kind of nonsense, those young girls are making fun of you, you know that? They're snickering and making remarks I swear it hurts me to see and hear.' But she wouldn't pay me no mind, no mind at all. 'I deserve my chance,' was what she'd say. 'I was cheated out of my chance when I had to marry you, but I'm gonna have my chance no matter what you say! You can beat on me, you can lock me in the bedroom, you can tie me up, you can do anything you want, but I tell you this, I'm gonna have my chance! And I'm gonna keep trying till somebody pins a ribbon on me and tells me I'm the queen. I'm gonna have my chance.'"

Until somebody pins a ribbon on me and tells me I'm the queen. Well, somebody had. "Had to marry you you said she'd said. She had to marry you?" Were there children, June wondered. She'd never even thought of the possibility of children.

George Petty looked down at his lap. His bluejeaned lap. Not so different maybe from back then when he'd perhaps been wearing denim bib overalls. June, glancing around, thought how it must have been to live in this place or a place like this with this man when one wanted with all one's heart to be a queen . . .

"Naw, nothing like that. I bought her, I guess you could say. From

her old man. He was a hundred percent no good, and her maw had died. She was turning on sixteen, and the men were sniffing around, so he says to me, 'George, you give me twenty-five dollars and you can have her.' That's how Betty and me got married. She was sniveling while the preacher was talking and even after, and I told her I'd be a good husband, don't cry, but just like all the time we had together, she never paid me no mind at all."

"I'm so sorry," said June. And she meant it.

On the way to Susie's place June drove by 1840 North Broadway, once called home. Eighteen forty North Broadway, built of brick, still stood; she stopped the car at curbside, debated getting out. A pair of women emerged, passed her car speaking Spanish. She could make out a mailbox arrangement beside the front door, four mailboxes, i.e., four apartments. The family "manse" had turned into an apartment house, no need to visit. She started the car, waited for a break in traffic, and pictured her mother coming out of that doorway, her immaculately dressed mother on her way to work at the Boston store in the cosmetics department while inside the house June's father lay still abed recovering from last night's carousing and Mam Bertha, the black cook, babysitter, washer and ironer, bedmaker, 1840 North Broadway major-domo and substitute mother figure, served scrambled eggs to one female nymphet named June, fussing at her all the while à la Mammy of *Gone with the Wind*. Mam Bertha, underpaid, overworked, and overweight, she died when June was thirteen, a bad time for dying for June and Mam Bertha.

June speeded up, turned left, and headed for East Kellogg and Susie Orton Dolby.

The big fat bald blob who answered the door was, she assumed, Susie's husband, so she said, "Hi, Leonard. I'm June Blythe, remember me?"

"Ummph." She took that as a "sure." "Susie's expecting you. Come on in."

The Dolby apartment was furnished pretty-pretty with chintz and Victorian bric-a-brac setting the scene. Leonard stayed barely long enough for politeness' sake, vanished down a hall to what Susie explained was "His den. I swear that man spends all his time in there watching sports. We've got one of those TV dishes, he gets I don't know how many channels and there's always some kind of game playing somewhere. It's nice to see you again, June. How long did you say you planned to stay in Little Hill?"

"I'll be gone shortly. As I explained at luncheon, I'm here to bury Betty Petty. Properly. Was she Catholic, do you think? No, I wouldn't imagine so. She probably wasn't anything religious, but then one never knows, does one? When I was young, I went to Mam Bertha's church with her one Sunday morning. I guess you could say Mam Bertha was my nanny; she did everything at our house. I thought it was a wonderful service. Everybody sang such joyful songs; they sang loudly, and some of them danced in the aisles. When my mother found out, she chewed Mam Bertha out something fierce, and I never got to go again. Maybe Betty Petty belonged to some Holy Roller church, that's what my mother called them. My mother was a Presbyterian, of course. She tried to turn me into one, but she didn't have much luck. Do you go to church, Susie?"

"Well, yes. Not all the time, of course, but on Easter and Christmas we make sure we're right there in a front pew at the Methodist Episcopal with a generous check for the collection. We'd go more often, but Leonard plays golf on Sunday mornings, he's been playing in the same foursome for years and he wouldn't disappoint his golfing buddies . . . would you care for some tea, June, or is it late enough for something stronger? How about a little sherry? It's never the wrong time for sherry, is it?"

"Susie, tell me about the night we played the trick on Betty Petty. Tell me what you saw and heard, tell me what you did after."

"Gracious, June, you really are wrapped up in that business, aren't you? So long ago. I'd almost forgotten. All I remember is putting the ribbon on her, she had the sappiest look on her face, and handing her that letter. She said something sappy, too, something like, "I reckon I died and went to heaven." And then Coralee started to snicker, you know the way she laughs, and that got the rest of us to giggling and then Betty Petty got suspicious. I remember thinking I didn't know she was that smart, to figure it out right off like that. She seemed just about as dumb as a rock to me, but right after Harold took her picture, she pulled that ribbon off and threw it, threw it at you as I recall, June. I can see you now standing there looking so dumbstruck with that sash in your hands. Funny, now that I'm talking about it it's all coming back. The rest of us were all laughing our heads off, but you weren't, June, I don't think you were. Must have been that you understood it was kind of a lousy thing to do . . . Well, afterwards, you wanted to know about afterwards. Betty Petty stalked off into the park. It was getting dark by that time, and Phyllis and Elsie were double-dating with the Car-

son twins, they were killed in the war, remember? They rode away with them, and Coralee went off with Harold, and some boy, I don't remember just who, showed up for Maxine, and my dad drove up. He was still pretty strict about where I went and who I went with in those days, so I went home and that's all I can tell you, June. God, I'm amazed I recall that much. It's been a lifetime!"

"Yes," June agreed. "A lifetime." She remembered holding the makeshift ribbon in her hands, a limp piece of blue taffeta, it had come on a basket of flowers her mother had won in a sell-the-most face cream contest. June had carefully printed the letters MISS RIVERSIDE PARK 1936 across it; she even recalled that the *P* had a tiny blot at the very bottom where the pen had leaked ever so slightly. But Betty Petty hadn't noticed—or had she? And why had she thrown it at June? At June specifically? As if June were to blame

Driving back to the hotel she felt exhausted, suddenly drained. For the first time since Betty Petty had come back to haunt her, June felt her age. She was much too old for this sort of thing. Her mended bones hurt, and after all these years, what did it matter? What good would it do Betty Petty to find out what happened? No good at all. And if she did solve the mystery, then what? Point the finger and say, "Shame, shame?" How foolish she was, how old and foolish. Theresa was right, maybe she would see Dr. Bennett or even that Dr. Gupta—no, strike that. Maybe it was time to go home, maybe it was time to go . . .

"There's someone waiting to see you," Theresa whispered at the door. "A man." She sniffed. "An old man. He's got a respiratory problem. You shouldn't get mixed up with anybody with a respiratory problem, you've got enough problems of your own . . ."

"Harold," said June. "Can I get you a drink? I need one. Badly. So will you join me?"

Theresa made a sound that came out hummph and left the room. June was sure she stationed herself behind the door to listen. Harold wheezed, managed, "Sure. Coralee keeps me dry as a bone. Got any bourbon?"

"Bourbon? No, will you settle for scotch? On the rocks or with soda? Rocks? Fine. Theresa, we need some ice. Scoot down the hall and fill the bucket, will you? So to what do I owe the honor of your visit, Harold? I hope everything's all right with Coralee."

"No, no, she's fine. This is her bingo night. She's some bingo player, Coralee. Comes home with a little profit most times . . ." He

coughed, produced a tissue from a jacket pocket, used it to spit. June turned away. Coralee had mentioned diabetes, but Harold had other ailments, serious ones it seemed.

The drinks helped. She felt better, and he seemed to breathe better, and Theresa, behind the door once more, could undoubtedly hear better—well, that was all right. Try as she might, she found it hard to keep secrets from Theresa, so she manufactured some scenes simply to appease her.

They chitchatted about old times (put that in your eavesdropping trivia file, Theresa, she thought), until after the second scotch on the rocks, when Harold leaned forward and whispered, "Are we alone? Where did that woman go?"

"I'm not sure," said June. She raised her voice, "Theresa? Are you there? I need you to run an errand for me, please. Mr. Dawson fancies some bourbon, and we haven't any in our liquor collection. Be a good girl and run down to that shop down the street and fetch some, please. You'll find some money in . . . well, you know where. Thank you, Theresa." And when Theresa'd gone, glaring, "You were saying, Harold?"

"Coralee says you're all wrapped up in this Betty Petty business; she says you're—like obsessed with it. She says you keep asking everybody where they went that night, asking like you don't believe them when they tell you. She says you got some idea that somebody—one of us somebodies—pushed Betty Petty into that alligator pit. That's a pretty lousy kind of obsession to be obsessed with if you ask me, June. What put that kind of bee in your bonnet anyway?"

"Ah. You haven't seen the picture, have you, Harold? Your photograph of the seven of us. You haven't seen that—well, here, I'll show you. See, here we are. On a summer evening sixty years ago six silly girls played a nasty trick on an unintelligent, unattractive, sad woman who was looking for some sort of approbation, recognition. They underestimated that woman, who caught on quickly and threatened to turn the names of the perpetrators in to the judging committee of the Riverside Park bathing beauty contest, which would have resulted in their expulsion from the competition. That threat caused consternation among the silly young things. I figure that one of them took the threat more seriously than the others, more seriously than I, for instance, because I was leaving the area anyway, but one of the other five—Phyllis, Susie, Coralee, Maxine, or Elsie—followed Betty Petty through the park, through the zoo, that's what I figure. She must have caught up with her near the al-

ligator pit, and during the argument that ensued, she struck Betty Petty with something, maybe with the high heel of her pageant shoe, and pushed her into the alligator pit. Then she ran away. That's what I think happened. Now, Harold, you look at all these pretty young faces and tell me—which one? Which one wanted to be queen regardless . . . was it Coralee, Harold? I think it must have been, why else are you here?"

He bristled; the bristling agitated the wheezing; the wheezing led to a coughing spell treated with a long swallow of scotch. Eventually he was able to speak, to say, "You got the wrong idea, June. Coralee, she didn't care that much, she just liked to be in on things, one of the bunch, she couldn't stand to be left out. I used to tell her, Coralee, you've got no ambition. Now, I got lots of ambition, always did have. I wanted to be the most famous photographer that ever was, but heck, stuck here in Little Hill who's ever gonna hear of Harold Dawson? I knew I needed a break, I needed something to put me in the limelight. Like if she was to win that Miss Riverside Park title, why then maybe she could go on to Atlantic City and that Miss America contest and I could be known as Miss America's special photographer . . . but Coralee, she didn't care that much. You're barking up the wrong tree when you try to put the blame on Coralee. She wasn't even there when it happened, not anywhere near there. I took her right home that night, not because I wanted to but because she wanted to go home and wash her hair. She said, Harold, how can I possibly win that contest if I don't wash my hair tonight and put it up? That's what she said, so I took her home. I'll swear to it."

June heard his worsening wheezing. Long, passionate speeches didn't do much to improve Harold's breathing. She watched his chest work as he struggled for breath, kept silent until his respiratory system improved, then asked, "And what did you do after you took Coralee home? She lived very near the park, that couldn't have taken you long. What did you do then, Harold? Did you walk back through the park? As I recall, you lived on the other side of Riverside, you'd need to come back to cross the bridge to get home. Did you walk back through the park and run into Betty Petty?" June had a sudden vision of Betty Petty so true to the eye it could have been real, Betty Petty sitting on a park bench. Was she weeping? No, Betty Petty had run out of tears. Dry-eyed, she'd simply cried them all years before. She was just sitting there, hating the world perhaps. Yes, surely, hating the world, and along came Harold with

his camera in hand, one of her torturers, and she would have . . . she'd called out to Harold Dawson, called him an ugly name maybe, probably, and Harold stopped still, seeing this woman, this grotesque (to him, to them) creature who didn't belong, and he would have said something back perhaps, something equally ugly, and she would have reacted, she would have flown at him perhaps, a witch of a thing, and he would have struck out—with his heavy-lensed camera?

Then, suddenly, logically in June's picture, Betty Petty lay at Harold's feet, lay silently at his feet, dead or alive? Alive maybe, and this boy—how old would Harold have been, sixteen, seventeen, somewhere in there—this boy panicked. This boy picked up the body, the body must be hidden, but where . . . there. The alligator pit!

"You're the one, Harold," June told him, her voice sure. "You're the one who killed Betty Petty." She felt a surge of elation, a back-draft of disappointment.

Harold wheezed a mighty wheeze, he tried to speak, he managed, "Sorry . . . wanted . . . say . . . sorry . . . didn't mean . . ." His labored speech turned to coughing, he coughed and coughed harder, a body-shaking spasm that went on and on to a crescendo, then suddenly ceased.

Theresa, on opening the door and entering, looked, blurted, "Oh my God . . ."

"The ambulance is coming," June told her. "I've notified 911."

"Is he . . ."

June didn't bother to answer. "Start packing," she said, sinking heavily into a chair. "I'm very tired," she said. "I'd better go home." She closed her eyes, thought that when she opened them she'd be watching the manicured lawns forever and ever. She'd lost her Betty Petty, and life was back to . . . a line of poetry flickered through June's thoughts; she tested her memory aloud: "As on a dull day in an ocean cave, the blind wave feeling around his sea hall in silence."

She heard Theresa say, "What? What did you say? Are you all right? Answer me, June. Are you all right?"

Once more she didn't bother to answer.

So Dead Yesterday

Frank Denton

Keith Salisbury wheeled his Morris into a parking space at the end of the village square. He stepped out of the car, pulling the collar of his raincoat around his ears. Rain fell relentlessly, puddling between the cobbles and along the sidewalk's gutters. One more village, one more square, one more monument to the dead of World War II, he thought.

He hurried across the cobbles toward the memorial. Only one person moved in the evening deluge, and she was climbing into her car. He had barely reached the center of the square when she started her engine and drove away, catching him briefly in the headlamps.

He turned on his torch and scanned the obelisk. He found the plaque and read "TO THE EVERLASTING MEMORY OF THOSE FROM LONG FORTNUM WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES THAT OURS MIGHT BE SAFE." Centered below that were the years "1939-1945."

Then the list began, CHARLES ARCHIMBALD, THEODORE ATKINS, CECIL BAXTER, DAVID COTTER, and on. He ran his light through the alphabetized roll, knowing

that he need not look far. Alfred Fowles was the name he looked for. And there it was.

Salisbury looked around as if searching for someone to whom to tell the good news. It had taken longer to find the war memorial than he had anticipated. He hunched into his raincoat, turned off the torch, and hurried toward his car. A light shone across the cobbles from the village church at the opposite end of the square. It should be dedicated to St. Dismal on a night like this.

Once in his car he drove through the slanting rain toward the Green Man, a pub he had passed on the way. He'd be content with a room there and whatever food the innkeeper could offer, a cold roast sandwich, pasty, anything. And a lovely lager, which he hoped was brewed on the premises.

The innkeeper was a bit startled at the stranger who came out of the dark wet night, but he settled him into a room above the bar and told Salisbury that his wife must certainly have something tastier than a cold pasty. When the landlord looked

in on his guest in the saloon bar, Salisbury had finished the hearty veal stew and hoisted a pint of the landlord's best in his hand. "Better than I could ever have anticipated," Salisbury complimented his host. The man smiled and returned to the public bar. Salisbury sat back to consider his case.

A man had come into the office of his enquiry agency late one afternoon. Salisbury had looked up from his desk to see a laborer still in his work clothes with his lunch pail tucked underneath his elbow. The man examined the office as if he had never visited such a place before. When Salisbury asked how he might help, the man nearly jumped.

It took some questioning, but Salisbury eventually discovered that the man was an emissary for a group of men who wished to hire him to find someone. Further, the man asked that Salisbury meet with the group on the evening next but one, when they could discuss the assignment and Salisbury's fees. Salisbury agreed, warning, however, that this was not a promise to accept the assignment.

On the Wednesday, then, Salisbury had found himself in the back room of an apothecary shop facing five men. None seemed inclined to speak, so Salisbury

introduced himself. "Gentlemen, my name is Keith Salisbury. I am an enquiry agent. How may I assist you?"

Four heads turned toward the fifth man, not the man who had visited Salisbury's office. The man made small motions with his hand, as if to indicate that he ought not be the spokesman, but the enquiry agent noted that he was more than pleased to accept the leadership.

"Please sit, Mr. Salisbury." The man's voice was unctuous and his manner ingratiating. Salisbury cringed inwardly. "My name is Eric Richmond. I am an apothecary and proprietor of this shop. These colleagues of mine are—" he pointed to each in turn—"Edward Thaxton, David Piper, Barry Gardner, and Ralph Spurrier."

Salisbury nodded to each in turn, and wondered in just what way might these quite common men be considered Richmond's colleagues. Certainly they didn't dress as if they were in his class. Two had not shaved for several days, he thought. One had a torn pocket in his dull workaday trousers, and truth to tell, one could use a good washing up.

He waited for Richmond to continue, but while the others looked to him, the apothecary seemed to have some trouble getting started. Finally he

blurted, "We'd like you to find a man. No, Mr. Salisbury, that's not quite right. We'd like you to find proof that a certain man is deceased."

Salisbury leaned forward. "Who might this man be?"

"He's a friend of ours, from childhood," the one named Piper said. "Or was. We've heard he's dead. In the war, you know." For this interruption he received a sharp look from Richmond. He quickly lowered his eyes. Clearly Richmond intended to be the spokesman for the group no matter how insecurely he'd begun.

"How did you come by this news?" Salisbury asked.

"Well, you know, rumors and such," Richmond replied.

"So you've no official notification of his death, nor any obits in the newspaper?" Five heads shook in unison. "Any contact with relatives who vouch for his death?"

It was clear that these five men simply didn't know how to go about getting verification that their friend was either dead or still alive. Easy enough for Salisbury, however. "I can probably give you proof one way or the other within a day or two. It will cost you twenty pounds, including expenses. If I may have the man's name and place of birth—"

"Don't rightly know his place

of birth," Richmond said. "He came to our village with his mum when he was still a baby. His name's Alfred Fowles."

Salisbury jotted the name down in a notebook. "Any middle initial? How old would you guess he might be?"

"A year ahead of me in school he was," Piper averred. "I'll be twenty-four come February."

Richmond glared at Piper. Salisbury chuckled inwardly. Piper was going to blurt things out whether Richmond liked it or not.

"There's more, Mr. Salisbury. We'd like you to find the memorial with his name on it. And his gravesite. We'd be more convinced that he was dead, then, you see."

Salisbury leaned back in his chair. No, he didn't see. Certainly an obituary or records from the War Office should be more convincing than anything else. "I see," he said deceptively. "You understand, of course, that will cost you considerably more money?"

"We're committed to this, Mr. Salisbury," Richmond said. He looked to the others for consent, and the others nodded. "We have several hundred pounds at our disposal, and we will pay readily to your reckoning." He placed three twenty-pound banknotes on the table. "This will get you started."

"Two final questions, gentlemen," Salisbury said. "The name of the village where you were children together. And do any of you recall the name of the town or village where Mr. Fowles lived before the war or where he is now interred?"

"What might be the meaning of interred?" the one called Thaxton asked.

"Where he's buried, Mr. Thaxton."

"Oh. Ain't never heard that." Thaxton subsided.

Richmond smirked. "We don't know where he lived. That's why we're hiring you. To find out."

Piper interjected, "Heard it wasn't far from our own village. His pap found work in the mill nearby."

"And your village was . . ."

"Ramsfield."

"Then, gentlemen—" Salisbury bowed slightly "—I'll be about it. You may expect regular reports of my investigation. Shall I send them here to Mr. Richmond at this address?"

Nods all around. Salisbury plucked the banknotes from the table and folded them neatly before placing them in his inner coat pocket. "Thank you, gentlemen, and goodnight." He quit the room and left behind the murmur of men all wanting to talk at once.

*

Salisbury sipped from his pint but barely tasted the lager. He thought back over the past week. Finding whether Alfred Fowles was truly dead wasn't as easy as he had thought. It turned out to be a fairly common name. He didn't know the place of birth, but he had an approximation of the year of birth. He finally dug it out with the help of an old acquaintance in the library of the British Museum. Born 1922 in Netherholme. Parents moved to Ramsfield when he was two. Moved away in 1935. Entered the army in 1939; fought in France, was killed at Dunkirk.

There was Fowles' life in a small pot, Salisbury thought.

But for the life of him Salisbury couldn't fathom why the five men were determined that he find this memorial. Proof of death from records held up in courts of law. Why couldn't these five men accept that?

Well, I'll draw up my report in the morning, he thought. He settled back to savor another pint and a final pipe before retiring.

No, I won't. The sudden decision startled him. He sat up straight and shook his head. Why shouldn't he write that report and put finish to it? He'd taken more time than he had thought possible and would receive more money than the task

was worth. Be satisfied with that.

But Salisbury was not content and would not be until he discovered what was behind this strange exercise. Something more than whether a childhood mate had died during the war, surely.

Two things came immediately to mind. He must ferret out one or more of those men whom he'd met at the apothecary shop. Not Richmond. He was the leader, obviously, and he wasn't going to say a word more than necessary. Certainly he would not reveal the real reason for the quest. Piper, perhaps. He was the one who bleated out answers when Richmond would rather he keep quiet. Piper, then. He ought not be too hard to find.

Secondly, a visit to their childhood village might yield something interesting. Or it might not. But he certainly wouldn't know unless he went there. So. Ramsfield in the morning then. He knocked the dottle from his pipe against the fireplace brick, downed the last swallow of lager, nodded goodnight to the landlord and others in the public bar, and took the stairway to his room.

Ramsfield was a two hour drive. Salisbury's pre-war Morris had little trouble, since traffic was light. Petrol was still

rationed, and those with autos saved their allocation for short Sunday drives.

He left the main road and followed a curving byway downhill. The village was situated in the valley. Houses were strung along either side of a cheerful stream, and the village green surrounded a pond where ducks floated serenely. The village was not large enough to require a square. Salisbury parked along one side of the green and stepped out of the car, searching the street for the grocer's shop. He was reasonably sure he would find the postmistress there as well. And nobody, in his experience, possessed more information than did the person who dealt with the villagers' mail.

He spotted a small sign hanging above a doorway halfway down a lane. As he approached he read "ABBOT'S GROCERS." He entered to find half-empty shelves and a slight woman of indeterminate age tallying figures in a journal. She looked up as a small bell over the door tinkled.

"Good morning," Salisbury greeted the woman. "I was looking for the post office."

The woman grinned. "Stamps, is it?" she asked. "Right back here." She turned toward the back of the store, where Salisbury could see a small postal cage.

"Well, no. Actually I was seeking some information about someone who used to live in this village, I believe."

The grin broadened. "Well, you've come to the right place, luv. I'm Mrs. Abbot. I've lived in this village for seventy years, and I've been postmistress for forty. Now, who might you be looking for?"

"Well, I'm not looking for anyone, actually. Not living here now, I mean. I'm looking for information on some men who spent their childhoods here." He named his clients.

"Ah yes, those boyos. Close to being yobs, those. There were six of them that ran around together. Oh yes, and the girl, of course."

"The girl?"

"Drowned in the village pond, she did."

Salisbury wondered how to keep the woman going, but he needn't have worried.

"Sad about the girl," Mrs. Abbot sighed. "Sarah was her name. Pretty little thing. Pity there wasn't a nicer bunch of lads or some girls near her age."

"What about the girl?" Salisbury urged.

"Drowned in the village pond, she did," Mrs. Abbot repeated. She nodded toward the green. "Those boyos had something to do with her death, mind you. But they never were able to

prove a thing. Police came from Leeds, even someone up from London. Sad, terrible sad."

"Did a boy named Alfred Fowles live here at the time?"

Mrs. Abbot tipped her head back and studied the ceiling. "Let me think now. Slight lad, sandy brown hair, hazel eyes, always a bit of deference about him, politelike, but maybe like he was currying favor. I dunno, he was all right I guess. I never trusted any of that lot. Always snitching sweets, you know. Yes, he still lived here when Sarah drowned. Moved away a bit later."

"Do you know why he moved away? Anything to do with the girl's death?" Salisbury was delighted with the information he was receiving.

"No." Mrs. Abbot frowned; then her face brightened. "Dad got a job in a mill up toward Leeds. Family moved to some village up that way a couple of years before the war. May still be there. Mill operated right on through the war, you see. Alf's dad, he was too old for the services, like. Alf went off to war. Heard he died, wounded at Dunkirk, got home and then died. So his mother wrote to one of her old friends here in the village."

Of course, Long Fortnum, Salisbury thought. Up toward Leeds. How could I be so stu-

pid? "So what about the rest of those lads?" he asked.

"Off to war, each in his time," Mrs. Abbot said. "All came back, as far as I know. Not to the village, though. Stayed down in Lunnon, so I'm told."

"How about Dave Piper? Was he one of the boyos?"

"Ah, the talky one. Yes, he was. Younger than the rest. Always used to interrupt the older ones. Eric Richmond would become very angry when Davey broke in."

Salisbury smiled. Still was a talky one, was our Davey. The talky one.

He couldn't think of anything else to ask Mrs. Abbot. Feeling slightly guilty about all the questions, he purchased some locally grown apples, red and rosy. With his conscience salved he thanked her.

"Not to worry, luv. Nice to think of things the way they were before the war. Come visit us when things are back to normal. We had a wonderful village fete. There's talk we'll start again next summer. Please do come back. Maybe the shelves won't be so empty."

"I should hope so, Mrs. Abbot. Recovery should be on its way."

The Morris started with a minimum of fuss, and Salisbury drove out of Ramsfield feeling content with his new bits of information. The girl, Sarah, had

drowned, and the young men had something to do with it. At least Mrs. Abbot thought so. Was it murder or merely an accident? Dave Piper might talk. Richmond wouldn't want him to. And Alfie Fowles was dead, reported so by his mother in a letter. That merely bolstered what the military records and obituaries had already told Salisbury.

Davey, the talky one. Back in London it wasn't difficult to find him nor to start him chattering. He found him in the evening in a bed-sit down a narrow lane. Davey seemed unsurprised, almost expectant when he opened the door to Keith. "Come about Alfie, have you?" he asked.

Salisbury stepped inside and nodded.

"Don't you let on to Richmond that you was here. I don't know what he'd do to me."

"Really?" Salisbury saw fear in Dave Piper's eyes. What was Richmond hiding? And how did he exercise such control over these grown men? Was Mrs. Abbot right—something from their boyhood in which all were accomplices? Or at least witnesses? The death of the girl, Sarah. That made sense. Feelings of guilt all around. But that wasn't the question of the moment. Later perhaps.

"Davey, I won't breathe a word to Richmond about this

chat. But I need to understand why he won't accept my findings from the records and newspaper obits. The man is dead. What is Richmond looking for?"

Piper sat down on the edge of his bed. "Alfy's been seen, he has."

Salisbury shook his head. It took a moment for the statement to sink in. "Somebody who looks like Alfy, you mean? Mistaken identity."

Piper looked up from where his head rested in his hands. "No mistake it weren't. One of our lads from the village saw him. Wouldn't make no mistake about a childhood mate."

"Where'd he see Alfy, then?" This should be easy enough to check out, Salisbury thought. "Give me a place, Davey, we'll sort this out right quick."

"Village where he moved before the war," Piper replied. "Long Fortnum."

"How did he see him, this mate? How did he happen to be there? Did he speak with him?"

"Deliverin' a load of coal he was. Just saw him walking along the other side of the road. So stunned, Jamie said, that he didn't think to call out. Alfy turned the corner and was gone. Now, that's all I've got to tell you, Mr. Salisbury. You'd best leave now before you're discovered here. Richmond would have me by the throat if he

knew." Davey Piper stood to usher Salisbury to the door.

"What's Richmond have over you and the rest of the lads, Davey?" Salisbury asked.

"No more," Davey blurted. "No more, you go now." Fear showed on Davey's face again, and Salisbury could see that he was more anxious than ever to see the back of the enquiry agent. Davey opened the door and stood impatiently tapping his fingers on the door frame.

"Thank you, Davey, for the information," Salisbury said, placing a hand on the other man's shoulder. "I'll find out if Alfy is truly alive and living in Long Fortnum." He looked straight into Davey's eyes. "And when I've done that, I think perhaps I'll find out why Richmond has you all frightened and what he's hiding."

Davey shrugged Salisbury's hand away from his shoulder. "Don't do that, Mr. Salisbury. The lads and me won't thank you for it."

"We'll see," Salisbury replied. "We'll see. Goodnight, Davey."

The morning brought showers to clean the air and made the country fresh as Salisbury drove north toward Long Fortnum. The Morris was depleting his ration of gasoline more quickly than he liked. On the

other hand, this case was much more interesting than finding out whether returned warriors' wives had been faithful in their absence.

Long Fortnum looked considerably different in the daylight. He nodded a greeting to the memorial on which he had found Alfred Fowles' name. Parking in the square was nonexistent. It was market day. Salisbury found a carpark in which to leave the Morris and began a long morning's work of finding out if Alfred Fowles were, first, alive, and, second, living in the town.

By the time the Rose and Crown opened for the lunchtime trade, Salisbury had talked to many people and checked several large ledgers of handwritten records at the municipal hall. He contemplated his findings while devouring a ploughman's lunch and a pint of Bass. He had found no Alfred Fowles. He had found, however, records of several other families with the Fowles surname. The addresses were in his pocket, and as he swallowed the last of his pint, he reflected that he'd better get on with it.

The first two addresses brought little information of consequence. A young war widow lived at the first with her two children. And the second yielded an ancient couple more interest-

ed in fuming about the shortages caused by the war than in supplying any information. When Salisbury learned they had never had any children, he decided that they were right for each other and left.

At the third house the door was opened by a stout woman wearing a housedress with an apron over it. She held a dust-mop in one hand and frowned at Salisbury. "Yes?"

"Mrs. Fowles?"

"Yes, I'm Mrs. Fowles. What is it?"

"I'm looking for your son, Alfred," Salisbury said.

A look of alarm entered her eyes, but she hesitated only slightly. "You'll not find him here," she said firmly. "He died during the war."

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry." Salisbury addressed a rapidly closing door. I'll believe that if you believe my mother was commander of the North Sea fleet, he thought. It's been a while since Dunkirk, and obviously nobody has questioned Mrs. Fowles before. She hasn't had much experience.

He walked back to the carpark and reclaimed the Morris. In less than five minutes he was stationed down the street from Mrs. Fowles' house. He slumped uncomfortably in the seat trying to reveal no more than his nose above the steering wheel. All

that was required now was patience.

Salisbury's persistence didn't pay off until late afternoon. Lunch pail under his arm, a man fitting Davey Piper's description of Alfred Fowles appeared. He walked like a man who had put in a hard eight-hour shift. When Salisbury rolled down the car window and said, "Alfy?" the man stopped in his tracks. And then it was as if a load of bricks had been lifted from his back.

He stood taller for a moment, then approached the car. "Who are you?" he asked.

Keith Salisbury looked up into a face neither angry nor antagonistic. "Keith Salisbury, enquiry agent," he replied. "Is there a pub where we can talk?"

The workman opened the car door and slid in. "Drive," he said quietly.

When Salisbury turned the ignition off ten minutes later, they had reached the Maltsters, a pub tucked up a narrow country lane.

"It's quiet here, and nobody nosy," the man said as they entered the public bar. "I walk here sometimes when the moon is bright to light my way."

The man walked to a snug in a shadowed corner. Salisbury ordered two pints of Bass and carried them to the table.

The man took a long pull from

the pint. He set the mug down and drew a breath. "Yes, I'm Alfie Fowles. How did you find me?"

Salisbury grinned. "A lot of legwork and a fair amount of thinking. And a tip that helped. You were seen by one of your old mates."

Alfred Fowles' eyes snapped open. "Richmond?"

"No. Let's go back to the beginning. Tell me how Alfie Fowles came to be dead."

The man's eyes showed despair. "It's all tied up together, you know. What happened when I was a lad and what happened at Dunkirk. Dunkirk was hell, but it gave me an opportunity." A flutter in Alfie's left eyelid showed Salisbury his fear.

"Sit back and finish your pint," he said. "Then I'll get another, and you can tell me your story."

Fowles nodded and gulped the ale. When Salisbury set another in front of him, he lifted it for only a brief sip. He leaned forward with both hands clasping the mug. "You want to know about the name change, don't you?" he asked.

"Among other things," Salisbury responded. "But you can start there if that's easiest."

Fowles scowled from across the table. "Ain't none of it easy," he said. "I thought—I hoped—Alfie Fowles had disappeared."

"I thought so, too, for quite a while," Salisbury assured him. "I read your obit so many times I had it memorized. On my life I couldn't figure out why those fellows wouldn't take it as proof."

"What fellows?" Fowles eyes pleaded for an answer. "You have to tell me, Mr. Salisbury."

"Childhood chums of yours, so it appears," Salisbury said. "They've had me searching the country for you, or rather for the memorial to your death. I found it, too, but apparently it lies."

"Have you told Richmond and the others?"

"Why do you keep going on about Richmond?" Salisbury sat back and drank from his glass. "I've mentioned nobody by name. Certainly not any Richmond."

Fowles leaned forward intently. "Don't play with me, Mr. Salisbury, please. It's Richmond. Couldn't be anyone else. He's got the others under his thumb, and if he finds I'm alive, he'll make certain that I'm there with the other lads. That's the reason I changed identities."

"Tell me about that," Salisbury encouraged. "That's a good place to start." He glanced around the pub. Four men had begun a game of darts, and the pubkeeper was busy drying stemmed glasses and shoving them into the wooden racks above the bar, where they hung

upside down like chickens at the butcher's.

"It was at Dunkirk, like the obits said," Fowles began. "Darroll Williams was my mate. Jerry pushed us right back to the beach, and we got away on one of the small pleasure boats. You remember, they called them 'the Little Ships.' But Darroll—that's whose name I took—he caught a German bullet on the beach, from the strafing, you know. I got him into one of the boats, a tiny thing it was, and I could see before long that he didn't have a prayer of making it. I thought the war had gotten me away from Richmond—I'll get back to him—and now we were heading back to England. Williams died in my arms. The boat's owner had his hands full, he did. The channel was calm, but there were small pleasure craft and lifeboats everywhere, even Thames barges. I saw my chance to not be Alfred Fowles any longer. I switched papers and dogtags with Williams. We were in the same outfit and held the same rank. I was wounded, too, but not seriously. Still, I'd be in hospital for a bit. Then chances were good that I'd be re-assigned and never see any of my outfit again. I took that chance, and it paid off. At least until now. Well, there's that part of the story. I'm Darroll Williams around here, and I

room with Mrs. Fowles. She's my mum, of course."

Salisbury heaved a sigh. "I suspected that. You comfortable with that? And your mother?"

"I'd be comfortable with anything that kept Richmond from finding me. Mum, too. She knows all about what happened."

Salisbury nodded and picked up Fowles' pint. "Another? Then you can tell me the Richmond part."

When Salisbury returned to the snug and settled in once again, it took a while for Fowles to get started. When he did, his voice was very quiet, and Salisbury had to lean forward to hear.

"It's back when we was lads, Mr. Salisbury, that's when it started. Now Richmond's got them all in the palm of his hand, Ed Thaxton and Barry Gardner and the rest. I'll wager they're afraid to breathe too deeply for fear he'll turn them in. But he's the one—" Fowles' eyes narrowed—"he's the one what did it."

"You're talking about the death of the young girl found floating in the village pond at Ramsfield, aren't you?"

Fowles looked up. When their eyes met, Salisbury saw an indescribable sadness. "She was a sweet kid, Mr. Salisbury. We saw it happen, but we didn't any of us know how to stop it. I don't even know if Richmond meant it to happen. But in the end it was

rape and murder, wasn't it? And we were all witnesses. And Richmond, being older, scared us into our silence. He even made two of the lads sneak out after dark and carry her body to the pond and dump it in. Threatened to tell our parents. He held it over us like a hangman's rope.

"That's why I took the opportunity at Dunkirk, and that's why I'm Darroll Williams now." Fowles shook his head, and tears rolled down his cheeks. "She was a sweet kid, was Sarah. Full of life. And Richmond choked it out of her. She shouldn't have run with us." He put his head down on the table and sobbed.

There was little more to the story. Salisbury drove Fowles home and then phoned a childhood chum of his own. He was Detective Inspector Aidan Tipcote of Scotland Yard.

When Salisbury finished relating his story, he heard a long sigh.

"That's some story you tell, Salisbury. My super will be very interested. As for the lads, they'll have to testify, of course. But I'd think that the judge would consider the circumstances and their ages when the crime was committed."

Salisbury agreed. "My suspicion is that they'd welcome al-

most anything to get out from under the thumb of this Richmond fellow. I hope you can move fast. You've got their names and should be able to find them at their workplaces. Fowles says he'll testify; he'd like to see the lads again. Except for Richmond. I'll call him and tell him I still have a few loose ends, but I'll lie low so he won't suspect."

"Not to worry, old son. We'll pick him up first. Assisting with enquiries, you know. That will hold him long enough for the wheels to turn."

The wheels did turn, inexorably. Justice was done. The judge did see that the lads were at an impressionable age and that Richmond had struck fear in their hearts. When they left Old Bailey after the verdict was rendered, they all walked with lighter steps and straighter backs. For them, at least, the world was suddenly a better place. Considerably better.

Only one question was left, and only Alf Fowles could answer it. Would he take back his own name now?

Something Far Away

Martin Hill

It was the kind of run Kellman Darby loved—the moonless night black and sightless, the sea running hard and blacker than the night. Not even the phosphorus stirred by the waves and the wake of the boat showed a glow. The sea ran wild, waves striking the bow from all angles, and Kellman joyfully fought to keep his balance and his course.

The wooden hull boards screamed as they took the strain of the sea. To Kellman it was a song of challenge, a battle cry. She was an old boat, still with gasoline engines, but Kellman knew she would stay dry. Few had been as well built. She could stand up to much stronger seas; all he'd have to do is guide her slow and easy and not beat her to death. Standing in the enclosed helm, cold but dry, Kellman felt secure.

Kellman believed she was a veteran of the rum-running days—she was of that vintage—and he could imagine her cruising the stream between Cuba and Florida, her lower deck crammed with illicit hooch. That was a distance and a time far

from where she was now, just southwest of Santa Catalina Island off the California coast, and what she was running was not booze, but something just as illegal as rum was then.

He called her the *Tía Maria*. It wasn't her real name. That had been painted over in port along with the registration numbers on her bow. Kellman had painted her new name across the stern while Tolbut and Cavalez painted phony numbers on her bow quarters.

The boat, of course, was stolen, but that didn't matter to Kellman. He took the same care of her as her real owner had. He had cursed Tolbut and Cavalez when they rammed her into the fuel dock in Ensenada, and every other time they were careless with her. Kellman frowned at the memory. To those two, the *Tía Maria* was just a tool, something to be used and tossed away when the job was done. Kellman had the hunch they could treat humans just as callously.

Cavalez came up from below and interrupted Kellman's reverie. He came through the

half-door leading to the galley and main cabin below, pulling on a pair of leather gloves and clicking his teeth in a mock shiver. His small torso was wrapped in a large army jacket cinched at the waist, and a dark navy watch cap was pulled down over his ears.

"How goes it, amigo?" he asked.

"It goes, it goes," answered Kellman dully. He resented Cavalez' intrusion. He would rather not see the short dark man behind the wheel of the *Tía Maria*. Only grudgingly did Kellman step aside and give up the helm. "Keep on your toes, Cavalez," he said. "You're fighting a wide compass swing."

Cavalez leaned forward and squinted at the dimly lit compass. "How can you tell?" He reached down and turned a knob, bringing up the console lights. "Why you keep the lights so low? You can't see nothing."

Kellman tapped the forward window. The black night outside had disappeared behind the dull yellow reflection of the lighted dials. "That's why," he said. "Now you can't see anything outside."

Cavalez grunted and turned the lights down. Kellman reached over and turned them lower. "Your eyes'll get used to the dimness," he said.

Kellman scratched his chin a moment. There was more than a day's growth of whiskers. He'd been at the helm most of the uphill run up the coast, wanting to protect the boat from the poor seamanship of the other two. But now he needed sleep. He shook his head and sighed.

"Catalina will be coming up off the port bow, Cavalez. Keep your eyes open and try not to hit it."

"Screw you, Darby."

"Now now."

"I been running boats lot longer than you, kid." Kellman visibly flinched. At twenty-five, he hadn't felt like a kid in a long while. "I know boats, kid."

"That why you almost blew us up back in Ensenada?"

"So I forgot to vent the spaces after refueling." Cavalez shrugged indifferently. "So what? I'm used to diesels, man, and lot newer boats than this old float."

"You just keep forgetting," Kellman said, "and someday I won't stop you in time and you'll blow us all to hell."

"Sure."

"Look, I've seen it happen."

"And where'd you learn everything about boats, kid? In the Shallow Water Navy?"

Kellman ignored Cavalez' remark and dropped through the half-door to the kitchenette-galley below. Through the door in the galley's forward bulkhead he

saw Tolbut sitting on his bunk in the berthing compartment. Tolbut, tall and lanky, prematurely iron gray for his thirty some-odd years, was clipping his fingernails. He held a tall plastic tumbler between his thighs. Kellman dreaded talking to the man; to delay the encounter he turned at the bottom of the small ladder, went aft, and checked the engines through a viewing port cut in the galley's aft bulkhead. The engines were running smoothly, so he slowly made his way through the galley to the forward cabin.

Tolbut was finished clipping his nails. Now he was reading a magazine with nude photos, taking occasional sips from the tumbler. He looked up as Kellman came through the hatch and called loudly, "Ah, Darby me boy! How is the ol' seadog?"

Drinking again, thought Kellman. Great.

"Come have a drink, Darby." Tolbut pulled a bottle of Jim Beam from under his pillow. "Fetch a glass, me boy."

Kellman got a glass from the galley and handed it to Tolbut. He sat on the opposite bunk, rubbing his eyes with resignation. This was the boring nightly ritual. Kellman, off watch, would have to sit up and listen to a steadily drunker Tolbut tell his sea stories. Or his whore stories. Tolbut always chose Kell-

man for these chats, never Cavalez. He delighted in calling the younger Kellman "Darby me boy" when he was drinking, and the more he drank, the more he sounded like a pirate in a cheap movie.

"Say when, Darby me boy." Tolbut tipped the bottle over and the whisky poured out in unsteady splashes.

"Not too much tonight. That's okay."

"Why, that's hardly none a'-tall," said Tolbut. He poured an extra two splashes. "A good seafarin' man needs his nightly grog." He handed the glass to Kellman, then placed the bottle on an overhead shelf. Kellman took a first sip and made a face.

"Ahhhhh," said Tolbut, curling his lips over his teeth. His right eyetooth was missing, leaving a grisly hole in his grin. There was something vicious about the smile. "Perhaps me dear young Darby would prefer some of what we're carrying below?"

"Never use it."

"Oh?" Tolbut raised an eyebrow. It gave him a one-eyed look, like a pirate with an eyepatch. "Disapprove and you run it? Strange contradiction."

"Just pay me my money and I'll run anything," said Kellman. "I don't give a goddamn what anyone else does with themselves any more."

"A man after me own heartless heart," said Tolbut. "Independent. A loner."

"Pragmatic," said Kellman.

"Pragmatic," Tolbut made a toast. "Here's to pragmatism."

"Skool," he said.

After the toast Tolbut asked, "When do we make Long Beach?"

"Two hours, maybe three," answered Kellman. "I think we ought to go into the harbor about one or two A.M., though. The Coast Guard harbor patrol will be over by then and the crews tucked away asleep. I'm sure they wouldn't recognize the boat even if they read the DEA's lookout list and the *Tía Maria* was on it. But no need to take chances."

"You sure they won't be patrolling?"

Kellman nodded his head. "When I was in the Coast Guard, I was stationed at the Captain of the Port there. We almost never ran a patrol later than one in the morning."

"Good. Then one A.M. 'tis, me bucko." Tolbut reached under his bunk, pulled out a rolled chart, and spread it on his lap. It was a chart of San Pedro Bay and the twin ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach harbors. He put his finger on the Los Angeles side of the horseshoe harbor channel. "We have a slip reserved in this marina," Tolbut said. "Slip 39. Are you familiar with this area?"

It was a rundown marina in the harbor's East Basin, on the landward side of the channel and on the far side of the Vincent Thomas Bridge. *That bridge.*

"I know it," Kellman said.

Kellman's mouth turned dry. He took a large swallow of the whisky and wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his foul weather jacket. Clearing his throat, he said, "I think we should go in on the Long Beach side of the anchorage and come up from the backside of the marina. Down through Long Beach Harbor and under the Henry Ford Bridge."

"What?" Tolbut said. "That's the long way around. That'd add another hour to our time."

"Yeah, but it'll let us see if anyone's waiting for us, following us," Kellman lied. "If there is, I know how to lose them in the harbor."

Tolbut let out a short, ugly laugh and playfully grabbed Kellman's neck in the crook of his arm.

"Aye, Darby me bucko, you're a worrywart. But I want to tie this old bucket up as fast as we can and get a decent night's sleep." He released Kellman's neck and slapped him on the back. "Worry not, me fainthearted friend," he said. "Nobody be looking for us. We be as safe as Morgan's treasure, we be."

"Glad you think so," Kellman said.

Tolbut raised his glass and drained it. Just as he reached for the bottle the boat took a steep roll and the Jim Beam shuffled across the shelf, hit the retaining strap, and flipped over, landing with a crash on the deck.

"Oh, me poor whisky!" cried Tolbut. He stared horror-struck at the shards of glass and the pool of whisky rolling back and forth across the deck. "There goes me night."

"Too bad," Kellman said dully. He soaked up the whisky with a towel from the galley, then carefully picked up the pieces of glass and dropped them into a wastebasket.

"Never fear," said Tolbut, producing another bottle of Jim Beam from the cabinet beneath his bunk. "Another's here."

"No more for me," said Kellman. He finished his drink and set the glass down. "I got to get some sleep."

He stripped off his boots and foul weather jacket, climbed into his bunk, and pulled the covers to his chin. Tolbut went back to reading his magazine. Kellman listened sleepily to the hull boards creaking. The last thing he remembered hearing was Cavalez' voice shouting down from the wheelhouse, "This god-damn boat sounds like it's falling apart!"

Tolbut woke Kellman just as the *Tia Maria* passed Los Angeles Light and entered the anchorage. Kellman pulled on his boots and jacket and went up to the wheelhouse. Looking around, he saw the familiar rotating beacon several yards behind the boat, and a couple of miles ahead the white glow of the harbor channels. He checked his watch: one fifteen.

"Let me take her in," he said, taking the wheel from Cavalez. "I know the harbor."

Kellman opened the throttles, and the boat churned faster through the protected calmer water. Guiding the boat past the black, hulking shapes of tankers and freighters was familiar and instinctive, remembering the reference points and lights still easy.

After a few minutes they rounded Reservation Point and headed up the main L.A. channel. It was lighted but quiet. The only sound drifting across the placid water came from the night shifts working the drydocks. Up ahead, Kellman could already see the stark white lights flooding the strutted structure of the bridge.

That damn bridge.

The sight sent a chill through his body. Kellman shuddered, leaned over the console, and

closed the wheelhouse window against the cold.

He tried to avoid looking at the bridge or at the water beneath it. He kept his eyes on the docks and warehouses bordering the channel, but he was already swept by the old, familiar dread. He tried to block the feeling, to talk it away, to wish it away, but it was there just as strong and solid as the bridge itself.

He tried not to think about the hours of dredging with cold, rough metal hooks, or the ghastly sight and sickening stench of the bloated victims. He tried not to remember how the dread that now dried this throat and pounded at his chest had made him sick and driven him away.

As they passed beneath the bridge, Tolbut and Cavalez opened the wheelhouse windows and looked up at the metal span. It was tall and very quiet. Kellman glanced at his hands gripping the wheel. His knuckles were pale and bloodless, yet his hands slid wetly against the varnished spokes of the wheel.

Then they were past the bridge and moving away. The tightness in Kellman's chest began to ease.

Two hours later a dark figure left a telephone booth at the end of the dock, next to the restrooms and communal showers, and walked toward Slip 39.

The night was at its blackest, just before the dark begins to ebb with the approach of dawn. Abeam the *Tía Maria* the figure stopped and stood perfectly still, listening. Water lapped gently at the old boat's hull; the fenders squealed as they rubbed between the freeboard and the dock. Snoring rose from the berthing compartment forward.

The figure stepped quietly across the gunwale onto the aft deck. A match was struck, its small flame shining like a distress flare in the darkness. The figure inhaled deeply, then sighed. He took a careless step, and the rubber soles of his boots screeched on the wooden deck.

"Who's there?" The voice was Cavalez'. Tolbut's sodden snoring continued uninterrupted. "Who is it?"

"Just me, Cavalez," Kellman Darby said.

"What the hell you doing out there, Darby?"

"I came up for a cigarette," Kellman said. "I can't sleep. That all right with you?"

"Well," said Cavalez, "I ain't got no problem sleeping, 'cept for the racket you're making up there, damn it. Keep it quiet."

"Yeah, sure."

Kellman Darby smoked his cigarette, and sighed again.

The weather had cleared by

the time they woke. The storm they'd passed through during the night had blown over, leaving only a few thick clouds high in the sky as a reminder. The day took on beautiful, warm colors.

It was afternoon when they took breakfast, after which Kellman set immediately to work on the damage the bow had received in Ensenada. While he worked forward, Tolbut and Cavalez waited impatiently on the stern for the contact who would guide them to the landing point where their illicit cargo would be off-loaded.

The damage on the *Tía Maria's* bow was not bad. Mostly scraped paint. A few of the boards showed splinters. One board was badly cracked and beyond Kellman's ability to repair it properly. It should have been replaced, but all Kellman could do now was temporarily seal the crack. When the seal had healed, he repainted the damaged part.

It was almost five when he finished. Tolbut and Cavalez were still waiting on the stern. Kellman picked up his tools, brushes, and paint can and was walking aft when Tolbut suddenly jumped to the dock and stormed off toward the landing.

"Where's he going?" Kellman asked. Cavalez shrugged.

Tolbut came back a few min-

utes later, his face twisted with disgust. "I just called that number they gave us," he said. "They told me there's been a change of plans. Something happened, and we got to keep things cool."

Cavalez jumped quickly to his feet. "What kind of thing happened?"

"All the guy said was something happened. Anyway, the contact's not going to be here till ten tonight." Tolbut stepped on to the boat and sat down on the deck. "Five hours, damn."

"Hey, Tolbut," protested Cavalez. "I don't like this. This don't sound good to me. This could be a setup."

"Shut up, will you? Don't you think I know it doesn't sound good? But what choice do we got? We can't unload this stuff ourselves."

"Look, I know a guy in Marina del Rey," said Cavalez. "Real smart guy. We give him a call, he could unload it."

"Since when do you know smart people, Cavalez?" Tolbut sneered.

"Look, I say this guy's smart. He's done it before."

"Shut up and let me think."

Kellman Darby walked slowly along Anchorage Road. The sun had dropped below the horizon, and the sky was painted red and yellow against dark, dark

blue. He had dined and had a couple of drinks at the inn in the hollow near the Henry Ford drawbridge, away from Tolbut and Cavalez. He ate slowly, then lingered over black coffee after the meal. When he was certain no one had followed him, Kellman used a pay phone in the restaurant to make another call.

Now walking back to the boat, he took his time. There was plenty of time left for him to take, and he had much on his mind. It wasn't the matter that troubled the other two. Kellman wasn't concerned with that, though he should have been. What bothered him was something far away but something that had always been close.

Earlier as he'd walked along the same road to the inn, Kellman had heard the low, moaning throb of twin diesels. He knew instantly what it was and had run down from the road to a point where he could see the channel clearly. The boat, its white bow sporting the familiar red, white, and blue Coast Guard "racing stripe," motored slowly down the channel at idle speed. Squinting, he studied the bow numbers. He smiled at first when he recognized them, but the smile soon faded as the sight of his old boat triggered memories he had tried hard to forget.

Memories of the bodies.

The first one was bad, mostly because Kellman hadn't been prepared for it. It was a young man, and they'd pulled him out not long after he went in. But Kellman had no idea how hard the water could be after falling from such a height. The mangling of the body shocked him. Putting it in the body bag made him violently sick. He'd had a hard time taking the boat and its grisly cargo back in.

After that Kellman was prepared for the broken bodies, but how bad it was continued to depend on how long they'd been in the water. If someone had seen them jump from the bridge and reported it, the boat would go right out and dredge. The metal hooks would snag the body, and it would be pulled up. But if no one saw the person jump, the body would sit on the bottom until, bloated from decaying gases, it rose to the surface. They called them "floaters." Floaters were the worst. The fish fed on them, especially the eyes, leaving the empty sockets looking like spectral caves in some distant, haunted valley. Sometimes the gases within would erupt, bursting the body like a balloon in your face.

For some reason he never understood, Kellman lacked the knack the others had of distancing himself from what he saw. Instead of forcing them from his

thoughts, he tried to understand why the victims jumped, what drew them to that bridge to hurl themselves into space and the fate that waited below. He talked about it too often at night with his crewmen during the idle hours spent waiting for emergency calls. He talked about it until they started to move away and eventually stayed away.

Kellman learned to stop talking about it, but he couldn't stop thinking about it. It became worse when the others began to notice that Kellman was the one who always had to go out and bring the bodies in. Whenever someone jumped or a floater surfaced, Kellman always seemed to be the one on duty. The officers insisted it was simple coincidence; the luck of the draw. But after a while, behind his back, even they began referring to Kellman by the nickname his crew gave him: Jonah of the Jumpers.

Then came the nightmares. After that, the dread. It swept over him each morning as he reported for duty. Eventually it became so bad that Kellman couldn't face going on watch. One day he just didn't. Then again the next. And the next. After five days, the shore patrol came and got him and charged him with being AWOL. But the Public Health Service psychia-

trists who examined him called it a nervous collapse. Kellman was taken off the boats, and transferred to duties that kept him away from that bridge and the victims it claimed.

After five years, he had almost forgotten them. Until today. Today, it all came back.

In no hurry, Kellman walked the rest of the way to the *Tía Maria*. It was dark now, a little past nine o'clock. Most of the boats along the docks were empty and sealed, their owners gone home. Some, those with live-aboard owners, had small lights burning that shone pale through curtained portholes. These too were quiet. The only boat that showed any life was the *Tía Maria*. To Kellman's surprise, Tolbut and Cavalez were making her ready to get under way.

Kellman covered the last few feet of dock in a half run and jumped aboard. "What the hell is going on here, Tolbut?" he demanded.

"Where the hell you been?" Tolbut demanded in return.

"Forget that. Just what kind of rip-off is this?"

"No rip-off. Not for you at least." Tolbut said. He finished coiling a line around his arm, looped and secured the loose end, and tossed it into a line locker. "Cavalez and me made a

decision," he said. "We don't like this waiting game. It don't smell right."

"Sure don't," said Cavalez, coming through the wheelhouse door.

"So we decided to take her up to Marina del Rey tonight and move this stuff ourselves through Cavalez' friend."

"Yeah," Cavalez said. "He's a real smart guy. He'll do us good."

"Everything's already planned and arranged," said Tolbut. He regarded Kellman with a mean eye. "You got any qualms, Darby?" He paused, then added, "Means we'll get more money, the each of us."

Kellman did have qualms, but he didn't say so. Instead he merely shrugged. "Long as I get my money."

Tolbut's mood lightened. He smiled his pirate smile, with the missing tooth showing. "Arrhh, there's me Darby," he said. "Help us get the rest of this gear stowed below, and we be shovin' off."

They got everything secured below deck for the run. Kellman checked the engines and fuel. The tanks were low. He told Tolbut that none of the fueling stations were open at night, hoping that would delay their departure.

"That's all right," said Tolbut. "Saw one on the way in last

night by that bridge. Looked easy enough to break into and start the pump. No one will notice at this hour."

"I hope not," said Kellman. "I hope the Coast Guard or the harbor cops don't come tooling around." He put a note of worry in his voice, but it was simply for effect. He already knew there wasn't any chance of being discovered. Not tonight.

"Darby me bucko," Tolbut said, "you worry too much."

"Yeah, Darby," Cavalez echoed, "you worry too much."

"Hello! Anyone aboard?" The voice, unfamiliar, came from topside. All three froze.

Again: "Hello! Anyone here?" The voice held a cold, cautious quality.

"Damn," whispered Tolbut. "It's gotta be the contact. He's early."

"Guess that blows our plan," said Kellman.

"It don't mean a damn thing," hissed Tolbut. "Just play it cool. Stay below, and play it cool. I'll go up and talk to him."

Kellman and Cavalez listened from below as Tolbut greeted the contact. There was no nervousness betrayed by Tolbut's voice as he spoke. He was calm and brought the man below without hesitation. The contact was tall and in his early thirties, dressed in blue Levi's and a white leather jack-

et. He stood wide-shouldered with an assured and aggressive stance.

"This is Mr. Thompson," Tolbut said casually. "That's Cavalez, and that's Darby."

Thompson nodded curtly, then quickly turned to business. "Get me a coastal chart, and I'll show you where we have to go," he said. "There's been a change of plans. We've got a long way to go."

"Sure," replied Tolbut. He disappeared up the ladder into the wheelhouse, leaving Kellman and Cavalez alone to exchange confused looks. Tolbut reappeared a minute later and handed Thompson a rolled chart. The contact man spread it across the small galley table. Tolbut moved behind Thompson, standing slightly to his left.

"There's an isolated little cove here," Thompson put his finger on a sliver of a crescent cut into the Santa Barbara coastline about two hundred miles north of San Pedro Bay. "We'll off-load you offshore using cigarette boats."

Tolbut grunted. "What's this about a problem?"

"What problem?" Thompson asked.

"When I called that number earlier, they said you're going to be late because there was a problem."

"Oh, that," Thompson said.

"That was nothing. Don't worry about it."

"But I do worry about it. What was the problem?"

"It was nothing. Some car problems, that's all."

"Then why this change of plans?"

"Had to do with the safe house. We can't use the original one." Thompson shook his head. "Of all the things. One of the neighbors blew his wife away last night. The neighborhood's been swarming with cops all day."

"I don't like it," Tolbut said, his voice taking on an edge. "How do we know you're not laying out a trap?"

Thompson stood up from the chart and faced Tolbut squarely. "A trap? What the hell are you talking about, Tolbut? You getting paranoid or something?"

"Maybe," Tolbut said. His lips curled over his teeth, exposing the missing tooth. "Maybe we figure it's safer to get rid of this stuff ourselves."

"You really don't want to do that, Tolbut," Thompson said, his hands tight around the edge of the galley table. "It'd be one huge mistake." The contact man turned and looked at Kellman and Cavalez. "For all of you."

Kellman watched Tolbut move his hand quickly behind his back, then bring it around

again holding a heavy metal paint chipper. He raised the chipper to shoulder height and swung.

Thompson caught the movement out of the corner of his eye. He dodged to his right, turning his body around to the left, bringing up his arm, and blocking the blow. His right fist slammed into Tolbut's face and sent him reeling across the deck. Thompson reached beneath his jacket, but he wasn't fast enough. "Gun!" screamed Cavalez, and with uncharacteristic swiftness he leaped across the table and tackled the man.

Tolbut was up again and moving fast. He swung the chipper sideways, and it landed against the side of Thompson's face. The first blow was enough to lay the man out unconscious, but Tolbut, maniacally screaming obscenities, kept swinging the chipper. Each blow made a terrible crack. Then the crack became a softer, mushier crunch. Blood splattered across the galley cabin.

Kellman stared at the fight, struck motionless by its horror. Then, without thought, he leaped across the compartment and kicked Tolbut in the face, knocking him over. He turned to face Cavalez, but again the small man moved too fast. Something hit Kellman on the side of his head, and he fell

against the table. For a moment he was blind and in pain; then there was nothing.

Kellman came to with a burning ache in his head and his throat choked with nausea. It was a while before his eyes cleared enough to see blurred outlines of his surroundings. He was in the forward cabin lying on a bunk. He was bound, his hands tied behind his back, his feet lashed together.

The *Tía Maria* was under way. Her engines throbbed slowly, at just over idle speed. Kellman figured they were still in the harbor channel. But he didn't know how far down.

"You ass."

Kellman turned toward the voice and squinted. It was Tolbut. He stepped into the cabin but lingered at the doorway. He held a small automatic pistol in his right hand. Kellman figured the gun must have belonged to Thompson; Tolbut didn't have one.

"You stupid ass," Tolbut said again. "I don't like being hit, not at all. I wanted to do to you what I did to Thompson, but you can thank Cavalez for still being alive. Said we'd already made enough noise. Maybe he's not so dumb after all."

Tolbut moved closer to Kellman and knelt beside the bunk.

Even though his vision was still blurred, Kellman could see how badly battered Tolbut's face was. His mouth was cut and still trickled blood. His right cheek was discolored and swollen. His right eye was partially swollen shut.

"But," Tolbut continued, "you aren't going to live long, Darby me boy." He stuck the gun hard into Kellman's chest. It was almost a blow. "So don't be going getting hopeful."

Tolbut pulled a bottle of whisky out of one of the cabinets below the bunks.

"We'll dump you along with that other ass, Thompson, just as soon as we get outside the breakwater." He smiled painfully and stood up. "Just means more money for Cavalez and me." He walked to the doorway and paused. "You really are an ass, Darby me boy. Really an ass."

He turned and walked out.

Kellman tugged at his bonds, only to cinch the rope tighter. The first effects of panic swept over him. Kellman forced himself to lie still, breathe deeply, and calm himself. There was a way out, he told himself, knowing he didn't really believe it. His eyes swept the cabin, taking in the bunks, the stowage cabinets, the lamps, the small wicker wastebasket. His eyes stopped. The wastebasket. In

the basket was the glass from the bottle broken the night before. Sharp pieces of broken glass.

He rolled himself off the bunk and hit the deck hard. Inching, shoulder and leg, he crawled across the cabin to the basket and used his head to knock it over. Pieces of the broken bottle scattered across the deck. Some of the pieces were only glass nuggets; others long slivers. Almost half the bottle was still intact. Kellman spotted a piece lightly larger than a half dollar with a thin, sharp edge. He picked it up in his mouth, cutting his lip, and inched away from the other shards. Blood oozed into his mouth, tasting flat and salty. A safe distance away Kellman dropped the piece from his mouth, rolled over, and felt for it with his hands. He found it, rolled it around, and placed the sharp edge against one turn of the rope.

The engines changed their pitch. They were put into neutral, then kicked ahead, then reversed. There was a thump, then one, then both engines were reversed, and the boat stopped moving. Topside, Kellman could hear movement on deck, forward and aft. Someone jumped from the *Tia Maria* and landed with a clump on a dock. Tolbut's voice whispered, "You

stay by the pumps. I'll go in and turn them on." There was a muffled crash, then glass tinkling. After a few moments Kellman heard a click, then a louder one, and then the hum of a pump working.

He felt his heart speed up, the throbbing so intense it seemed to shake his whole body. At any moment he feared Tolbut or Cavalez would come below and catch him. He worked at cutting his bonds faster. Once he slipped with the glass and cut his wrist. It wasn't painful, but deep. He could feel the blood flow warmly across his hand. It made the glass slippery, then sticky. He kept on cutting.

The pump stopped. There was the sound of movement on the dock again. Only a few more minutes for venting, Kellman figured, then they would get under way again. He worked feverishly at slicing the rope, at the same time planning his escape. He looked at the hatch overhead. It led to the fo'c'sle deck forward of the wheelhouse. Through that hatch, he told himself, then straight into the water. If he was quick and they weren't alert, they might not even see him. If they did, he would have to swim underwater a long way. He stopped cutting, gave the rope a tug, and felt it give a little.

Suddenly the boat lurched, and Kellman could feel it move

away from the dock as if someone had pushed it. He felt it roll deeply starboard, then gently rock from side to side until it settled, the way boats do when someone leaps aboard. The boat simply drifted with no way on. Kellman pulled against the rope, pulling outward from his body with all the strength in his upper arms and shoulders, until it parted.

His hands freed, he sat up and started cutting the rope binding his legs. Then he heard the engine starters pushed. He looked up thinking, *Cavalez has done it again. He forgot to vent the spaces.*

The engines didn't catch, and the starters were pushed twice more. On the third time the vapors blew. There was a muffled explosion, then a *shwooshing* roar. The boat shuddered, leaped out of the water, and landed again with a crack.

The explosion knocked Kellman down, but he sat back up without hesitation and continued slicing away at the rope. Outside he heard yelling and screaming. Someone in pain. Burning he supposed; he'd heard that kind of scream before. He was almost through the rope. Only a few strands left. Suddenly a wave of water rushed through the kitchenette door. It filled the cabin, picking up Kellman and sweeping him across

the compartment until he smacked hard into the forward bulkhead. He lost the piece of glass, and his legs were still tied.

Kellman thrashed frantically until the initial rush of water subsided. He regained his balance and climbed into one of the bunks above the water level and tugged at the remaining strands of rope.

He felt his hands turn raw from the hemp, but he also felt the strands stretch and weaken. Kellman straightened his legs and pulled with all the strength in his back and arms. His face contorted with pain. His arms bulged and whitened with strain. The rope broke with a snap.

Freed, he stood up and started undogging the overhead hatch. The water was well above his knees. There was a loud, eerie creaking of strained timbers, then suddenly the boat shifted position and settled stern first. Water rushed in again, throwing him off his feet. The boat took on a steep angle, and thrashing, Kellman sank toward the stern.

He caught himself and climbed forward. An air bubble was trapped in the forward part of the compartment. He reached it and took several deep breaths. The last one he held as he reached down, turned the last dog, and popped the hatch. The

open hatch released the air bubble, and the cabin filled completely with moving water. Kellman was pushed against the forward bulkhead. He held onto his last lungful of air with desperation. Pulling himself to the hatch, he tugged and pushed his way through, fighting the suction of the sinking boat. Outside the hatch, he felt himself dragged down with the boat, stuck to it like glue. He set a boot flat against the deck and kicked off. The suction broke.

The surface overhead glowed dimly with the flickering light of fire. Kellman's lungs ached on the edge of bursting. He had to make a conscious effort to hold his breath as he swam away from the flames overhead.

He broke surface and took a great gasp of air thick with the taste of gasoline. He took another breath and another. The gasoline vapors made him sick. He retched into the water, caught his breath, and started swimming toward shore. He didn't turn to look at the fire until he reached the edge of the channel and hooked his arm through the bottom rung of a wooden ladder leading to the wharf. The *Tia Maria* was gone. There was no sight of Tolbut or Cavalez. All that remained was the fire burning on the water's surface, spreading slowly like a glob.

Down the channel the fireboat's siren wailed. Then another siren, this one more familiar, and soon a flashing blue light. The Coast Guard boat's white hull sped into sight, the white phosphorus bone in her mouth dyed yellow and red by the fire. A crewman on the bow spotted Kellman and shouted to the coxswain. The boat reduced speed and drew near. In the yellowish-red glare of the fire, Kellman read the boat's hull numbers. His old boat.

He was pulled aboard by his arms. His wrist still bled. A crewman produced a first-aid kit and bandaged the wound. Still sick from the vapors, he broke away and vomited into the water.

"You're Darby, aren't you?" asked a voice. A figure came down from the wheelhouse to the after well deck where Kellman clutched the gunwale. "You are Darby, right?"

Kellman nodded, wiping his face with his bandaged arm.

"I thought I recognized you," said the figure. He was a tall, lanky man in his early twenties with petty officer stripes on his collar and a coxswain's insignia over his left shirt pocket. "I'm Jefferies. You probably don't remember me. I was assigned to the boat just about the time you were transferred to Coast Guard Intelligence."

Kellman didn't remember the young man, but he waved a limp hand in greeting anyway.

"I heard from the senior chief that you joined the DEA after your discharge," the coxswain said. "He said he ran into you last year when that freighter was popped for smuggling. Remember that?"

"Yeah." The single word started Kellman gagging again.

The coxswain took a thick woolen blanket from another crewman and wrapped it around Kellman.

"So what the hell happened here, anyway?" he asked. Then he proceeded to answer his own question. "Captain of the Port has just about every Coast Guard and port police unit covering the anchorage looking for some boat called the *Tía María*. DEA said she was carrying drugs, and we were supposed to follow her if we could. Said they had an undercover agent on board. Bet that was you, huh?"

Kellman nodded.

"Funny, I thought you weren't supposed to get under way until 2200," Jefferies said, glancing at his watch. "It's just barely fifteen till now."

"Plans changed," Kellman gasped. "I wasn't able to get to a phone again."

"Well, looks like someone really screwed up," the coxswain said. "Smells like gasoline. For-

get to vent the spaces before starting your engines?" Kellman nodded. "Jesus, Darby, you of all people should've known better."

The fireboat arrived and pulled a body out of the water. Kellman couldn't be sure, but it looked like Tolbut's. A short distance away from the fuel dock Kellman saw another body bobbing in the water, face down. *Like a floater*, he thought.

At the edge of the fire floated a large, ragged piece of wood, part of a boat's transom. Kellman could read the heavy, black letters: *TÍA MA*. A deepening emptiness ached inside him.

He looked up and saw they were under the bridge. The mas-

sive structure watched over the scene unperturbed. Light from the fire flickered on its underbelly, but it stood stoic and untouched.

The gasoline fumes made Kellman sick again, and he vomited into the water. He looked back at the fireboat, now pulling Cavalez' body from the water. He glanced back at the bridge and added two more lives to those he knew had died beneath it. This time, however, he felt no sympathy.

He turned to the Coast Guard coxswain.

"Get me away from here," Kellman gasped. "Get me the hell away from this bridge."

Bell, Crook, and Vandal

Dan Crawford

Now, this is supposed to be a true story. If it were just my mother's word for that, I might doubt it because she's the one who told me if I ate my crusts I'd have curly hair. But she was drinking coffee in the church basement at the time, and I can't believe she'd fib to me with God so obviously overhead.

It happened in those dim, dusty days when banks might close without warning because of little difficulties of finance. A bank might look dark and respectable one day, but *be* dark and locked up the next. When this happened, those places that had occasional concentrations of cash—say, a church after Sunday collections—had to let the cash just sit there until the bank decided its affairs were in order again, or a new banker came to town.

Joe Herbert knew the money had to be in the church, and he had a good idea where the cashbox would be, though he was not the sort of person who'd been inside the church a whole heck of a lot. But to be allowed to work on that cashbox, he had to get rid of Toivo, the big Finn who was employed as janitor there. Joe had no doubt the pastor had told Toivo to keep an eye on the safe, and he also had no faith in his ability to overcome the much larger Toivo if it came to a struggle.

Fortunately, he had perfect faith in his ability to overcome Toivo in a mental contest. He was correct about this.

"Toivo, Toivo!" he shouted, running across the street.

"Hah?" inquired the janitor, who had been polishing the big wooden front door.

"Those sheets!" Joe gasped, dashing up the five concrete steps to the door. "Those sheets Pastor uses to divide the basement into Sunday school classes!"

Toivo scratched his head. "The s'eets?" he said, showing where he was from by his accent.

"Those sheets Pastor hangs over, ropes in the basement to make classrooms," Joe said. "A skunk's got in and chewed up the edges to make a bed. You better run to the church in North Eagle, and get more while I lead the skunk out."

Toivo wore a size forty-four shirt and a size four hat, so it never occurred to him to ask how this man could have found out about a skunk and the sheets while across the street. "Hokay!" he said. "You get dat skunk; I get s'eets."

So he set off on foot for the next town, a matter of some six miles on a dirt road. On the way, so he'd remember, he repeated to himself, "S'eets, s'eets, s'eets." His legs were sturdy enough to take him to North Eagle in not much time, but by the time he reached the church, between dust from the road and the effort of running, he could only pant, "S'eets!"

The pastor in North Eagle was a little startled by the sight of a dusty Finn panting, "S'eets!"

"Seats?" he demanded.

Toivo put a hand on his chest, trying to force out a little more air. "For shursh basement," he gasped.

"Oh," said the pastor. "Oh, of course." That made it all clear to him. Obviously the church in South Eagle was going to be holding a bigger funeral than usual and needed extra chairs for the reception afterward in the church basement. It was not at all an unusual request, though in general his brother pastor to the south didn't send a messenger running all this way with the message.

He rubbed his chin. Now, who could have died, to require such a large funeral in such a hurry? No one but the mayor, he supposed.

"Well, you'll have to go over to Teeple's Funeral Home," he told Toivo. "That's where we borrow seats."

Toivo shook his head. "I don't know where . . ."

The pastor put a hand on his shoulder. "I'll drive you over there. You'll be needing a wagon anyhow."

Toivo didn't know why anyone would require a wagon to carry sheets, but he was glad of the offer of a ride. It had occurred to him that the good fellow who had told him about the skunk might be needing some help as well as sheets. He didn't believe he'd be much use in removing a skunk from the church if he had to run both ways.

The pastor had his horses hitched to his wagon in no time and drove three blocks to a large brick building. "Wait here," the pastor told him, handing him the reins. "He knows me, so there won't be any trouble about the arrangements. If anyone comes by and asks why you've got my wagon, just say you're here to see Mr. Teeple."

"Hokay," said Toivo. So he'd remember what he was doing he murmured to himself, "'Eeple, 'eeple, 'eeple."

"Kimball," said a woman who was walking down the street, her arm in her husband's, "There is a man in front of the funeral parlor saying eepple."

Her husband looked over at the wagon. "He must be a Finn. From Finland."

"I knew he wasn't a fin from a fish," she retorted.

He shrugged. "If you've ever been to South Eagle, where so many of the Finns live, you know how they drop letters sometimes when they talk. He's probably calling for old Teeple."

"He's very quiet," noted his wife.

Her husband shrugged again. "Then maybe he's just saying steeple."

"That's it." She stopped on the edge of the wooden sidewalk and studied the wagon. "That's why he's borrowed the pastor's wagon. He has to go over to the depot in East Eagle."

"I don't think he's saying depot," her husband said.

"No, no. Don't you see? He must be going to fetch a bell for the church in South Eagle. That's why he's saying steeple."

"So they can afford a bell for their steeple now, can they?" her husband demanded. "Well, that certainly puts us in the shade. I believe I'll go inquire."

He thought about asking the man in the wagon, but there was something about a huge man muttering eepple that made him think this might be more work than it was worth. So he just nodded to Toivo and stepped inside the funeral parlor. He found the pastor in deep conversation with old Mr. Teeple.

"Morning, pastor. Morning, Teeple," he said. "What's to do?"

"Haven't you heard?" old Mr. Teeple demanded. "The mayor of South Eagle died during the night."

"I see." The man stroked his sidewhiskers. "And they thought they'd better buy a churchbell so it could be told."

"Our mayor should be told, too," said the pastor.

"I'll do that," said old Mr. Teeple, "if you'll carry the chairs out to the wagon. Oh, and take these." He handed the pastor a pile of old sheets. "The road to South Eagle's pretty dusty."

Toivo was glad to see the sheets, and glad to see the chairs as well. That was the answer to why Pastor had insisted on taking the wagon. Being an intelligent man, Pastor was obviously planning to run two errands at once. Toivo didn't mind that at all, though he did wish they could do his errand first. If that skunk was the kind who tore up sheets, it might get into the pew cushions next.

Mr. Teeple, meanwhile, hurried out the side door of the funeral parlor and strode quickly to City Hall. He found the mayor just unlocking the main office.

"Have you heard, Your Honor? The mayor of South Eagle's died just as he was getting ready to dedicate the new churchbell."

His Honor took five steps backward. "Well!" He had always expected that his town would be able to boast a bell long before South Eagle. East Eagle already had a bell, of course, but the railroad had gone through East Eagle, giving it an advantage.

"Well," he said again. He shook his head. "I suppose I'd best pay my respects both to the late mayor and to the bell. I wonder if I ought to prepare a speech."

"Not much time for that, Your Honor," Mr. Teeple told him. "They must be holding the service this afternoon. The pastor down there sent his janitor running all the way to borrow my extra seats."

"All of them? The whole town must be turning out." The mayor thought this over. "And well they should, at a time of such civic tragedy and triumph all at once. Well, North Eagle can show them they're not alone in celebration or in sorrow."

The mayor's secretary came into City Hall just then and saw his chief in grave discussion with Mr. Teeple. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"John," the mayor said, "you'd better run down to the grocery and use the phone. Call Central and spread the word that the mayor of South Eagle has died just as he was ready to dedicate the new churchbell. Rose at Central can tell everyone on the line." He shook his head. "Imagine—struck down with his hand on the very rope."

He was really just rehearsing good sentences for his speech and didn't mean it quite the way it sounded. John didn't know that. He hurried to the grocery, which was the nearest building to City Hall with a telephone.

"Rose!" he shouted almost before he'd picked up the earpiece. "Get the word out! The mayor of South Eagle was killed just as he was getting ready to dedicate the churchbell! Someone struck him down when he put his hand on the rope!"

The news of the murder spread quickly. Meanwhile the wagon had been loaded with chairs and covered with sheets, so the pastor of North Eagle set off on the dusty southern road. Toivo was so worried about what the skunk might be doing in the church that he never noticed he was leading a parade. John, the mayor's secretary, was right behind the wagon. Behind him came Miller the grocer,

Grosser the miller, Lawyer Clay, Lawyer Baker, and a good dozen other carriages. As they started south, other buggies and wagons joined the procession.

Toivo saw none of this. "Fas'er, sir," he implored the pastor. "That 'unk might 'ill be dere."

He said this loudly enough for John to hear it. John had been careful to be right behind the wagon with his little rig to hold the space for the mayor, who had to run home, change clothes, and get his wife and four daughters into his Sunday carriage. On hearing this he decided that wasn't really necessary. He turned and urged his horse back along the row of carriages.

"We need the police chief," he told those who asked. "The murderer may be holed up in the church."

The chief was, in fact, trying to join the parade. He had one of the four automobiles in North Eagle and was trying to get it started. When John rode in and told him they might be called upon to roust out a killer, he gave up and saddled one of his horses.

Joe, meanwhile, was staggering out of the church carrying the cast-iron cashbox. As he had expected, it hadn't taken long to find the safe, but he had wasted valuable time trying to get it open. Someone might get suspicious, he thought, seeing him carrying a heavy black box the size of a large hatbox. He decided he could slip around to the alley at the back and carry the box through back yards until he got home. It was still early after all. Who would see him there?

His eyes were on the stairs as he came out of the church. He looked up when he reached the bottom.

A line of carriages, all filled with people in their Sunday clothes, stretched all the way up the street, perhaps as far as North Eagle. It was still moving, but Toivo had jumped off the first vehicle and came running up to him, shouting, "That 'unk—you get him?"

"There's the man!" screamed a woman in the third wagon back.

"He killed the mayor to get the cashbox!" shouted the driver of the second.

"Where's the bell?" someone hollered.

"He stole that, too!"

By this time Joe had decided he didn't really want the cashbox so very badly. Dropping it, he turned to run. By this time, though, Toivo was not the only man who had jumped out of his seat, and he got only halfway along the side of the church. He found himself at the center of a flurry of kicks and fists, the target of all of them.

Had the mayor of South Eagle not shown up just then, bringing his own police chief to see what the parade was all about, there's no telling what might have happened.

What did happen was that a would-be thief was carried off to the South Eagle jail, while a pair of mayors and a pair of pastors decided to have a party in the church basement, so long as everyone was already dressed up and they had extra chairs. Citizens of North Eagle and South Eagle sat together and discussed how bad crime had gotten these days, when the banks might open again, and the unusual state of the weather. The two mayors dared each other over coffee to have a bell in the church tower first.

For his part, Toivo searched the church thoroughly, finding no skunk. Evidently the good fellow who had warned him had had time to chase the animal out before any sheets actually got torn. He wished he had had more to do with getting the skunk away from the church, but things seemed to have worked out, after all.

The Bootleggers

Teddy Keller

We had nine guys show up. That meant three infielders and two outfielders for two-batter work-up. And that meant a pretty quick rotation. Unless you could hit for better than a single or unless you could steal a base or two, you almost sure wouldn't get home if the other batter didn't whack a long one.

I started out at first base. When Billy Porter hit a dinky grounder right at me, I tagged him out unassisted, and I advanced one position. My pitching arm wasn't warmed up, I guess, because I threw one behind Junior Smith and one over his head. Then he belted a liner to left field and got all the way to third.

Junior took a long lead at third, and when Chris hit a shot right back at me, I had an easy toss to third to double up Junior. That moved me up two steps and to batter.

Well, Junior was mad, getting doubled up like that. He grabbed his new fielder's glove, stomped out to right field, and started yelling. Some of it was the usual pepper stuff: "Come

on, pitch, fog it by 'im." "Weak stick. Make 'im hit the ball." That stuff.

But when I came up, Junior hollered, "Don't let this guy on. He'll steal bases like his dad steals from the bootleggers."

I wasn't sure I heard right, so I ignored it. Then on the first pitch I popped a short one to left and wound up standing next to Mike Bevens on first. He said, "That ain't true, is it?"

It took me a couple of seconds to figure what he meant; then I gave him a disgusted look and said, "Heck no." On the next pitch I took off and stole second.

"I told you," Junior yelled from right field. "Just like his old man steals from the bootleggers."

I stood on the rock that was second base, jammed my hands on my hips, and glared out at Junior. This was the sort of situation that could start a fight. Which I didn't want to do because I liked baseball and fighting was for soreheads. Him and his new glove. Maybe that was what made him a bigshot more than usual.

"Let's play ball," I said. And I

turned around and put my back to Junior.

Ben drifted past on his way to roam shortstop and said, "If you wanta take on Junior, I owe him a belt in the chops."

Well, if there was talk about my dad, the police chief, being in cahoots with bootleggers, I sure wanted to know about it. When I took my lead off second, I looked all around me, and I could tell. The guys who hadn't heard or didn't believe any talk about my dad were the ones who acted like ballplayers and yelled more pepper stuff. The other guys wouldn't look me in the eye. I figured it was about half and half.

After that we batted around twice, and then the game pooped out. Mike said he had to run an errand for his mom. Junior took off with his new glove. Chris said he didn't feel too good. The other guys messed around a little and then faded away. That left Billy and me. For whatever reason we moseyed over to the corner of Main and Broadway.

I wanted to watch for gangsters and criminals, but I also needed to get Billy talking. I couldn't just say, hey, are you one of the guys accusing my dad?

But after we watched cars go past for a few minutes, Billy jumped right in and said, "My uncle up in Junction City knows

a guy who got arrested for bootlegging."

"No kidding."

"You know how they caught him?"

"No."

"Neither do I. I thought maybe you did." Billy chewed on that for a while. "I mean, I thought maybe your dad had said how they knew."

I shook my head. "I never even heard much about bootleggers until last week."

"Maybe the bottles leak."

"Maybe they can smell the stuff. I don't know."

"Well, maybe we can catch us a bootlegger," Billy said. "I'll watch and you smell."

And I said, "After that ballgame, we both probably smell."

Billy punched me on the shoulder, and I kicked him in the seat. Both real easy. And then we laughed. And then we just watched the traffic going past.

Most cars went by slowly, and we could give them a good look. They all ran about level, so if there were any leaky bottles, they wouldn't spill out. Billy pointed to an Essex that had its back end down. But when it came past, we could see Mrs. Richards in the back seat, and she was fat enough to tip a farm truck.

We knew most of the cars—Mr. Bradford's Chevy, Mr. Tay-

lor's Hudson, Mr. Shearer's Pierce Arrow—and they all rode slowly, easy and level. Even Mr. Smith—Junior's dad—came past in his big Buick, and durned if it didn't tilt down in the front.

I kept trying to sneak in a way to ask. Finally I just blurted, "Is there really talk about my dad?"

Billy didn't much want to answer. He hemmed and hawed before he said, "My folks heard some."

"Like what?"

"There was a story in the *Wichita Eagle* yesterday."

"About my dad?"

"About the bootleggers. Most counties've arrested more than your dad has."

That explained some things. "And so people like Junior shoot off their mouths."

Billy shook his head. "I guess it's a big problem."

And that's why we hung around Main Street the rest of the morning, but we never saw or smelled a single car that might've been smuggling hootch. When the courthouse clock struck twelve, we both headed for home and dinner.

My folks were in the kitchen, and it sounded like Mom was setting the table. She called to me to wash my hands. When I got to the kitchen, they were both laughing.

"It wasn't so much that the

front end was up," Dad was saying, "but that the back was squashed down. You know how hard the springs are on that old Ford."

"If it's like the one we had," Mom said.

Dad was wearing his summer tan uniform, and Mom was in a print dress and apron. She looked at my hands and smiled and motioned me to the table.

"He could've had ten cases of whisky in that car," Dad said, "so I stopped him. Turned out that his truck had broken down and he had these hundred-pound bags of grain in the back seat."

"Was he mad at you?"

"I stopped him at the edge of town where nobody saw us. I think he thought I was going to give him a ticket for improper use of a passenger car. Anyway, he thanked me when I let him go."

"Good thing," Mom said as she brought food to the table. Then she announced, "Soup's on."

Front end up? I really listened when Dad asked the blessing. Now I knew that he was doing his duty, and I knew one way to spot a bootlegger. All of a sudden I felt a lot better, and I was hungry enough to eat a horse. About the time I was finishing my dinner, Dad got up and went to the living room. He came back with the *Wichita Eagle*.

"There's another one today." He handed the paper to Mom and said, "Now they're quoting William Allen White."

"Who?" I asked.

"That newspaper editor in Emporia," Dad explained. "I thought he was famous for his cluttered desk. But the big city papers quote him sometimes."

"Here it is." Mom twisted in her chair to get the light right on the page. "Mr. White says, 'As long as voters can stagger to the polls, Kansas will remain a dry state.'"

Dad grumbled, "And we'll have bootleggers running the stuff in from the wet states around us."

"Here's a chart," Mom said. "It shows the number of arrests, county by county. Heaviest in the border counties, of course. But about three-to-one around us."

Dad made a face. "Which makes me look as crooked as a dog's left hind leg. Or at least incompetent."

"What more can you do?" Mom asked.

"Along about August," I said, "you might track some of those guys to Colorado."

Dad chuckled, "All the way to Estes Park?"

I nodded. "It'd take a couple of weeks, at least."

"At least," Mom said. "But right now I remember that

somebody's supposed to help me in the yard this afternoon."

Which took care of the rest of the day. When Dad came home for supper, he didn't have much to say. After supper I scouted around for several blocks but never did find enough kids to play kick-the-bucket.

Ben and his brother were out on their front porch with a new airplane model. This was a Fokker Triplane, and I was always impressed with what they could do with balsa wood and glue and tissue paper. They had this one about ready to fly. But their mom told them to turn off the porch light because it attracted bugs.

She said, "How's your dad, Ed?"

I said, "Just fine." And then I saw the folded up *Wichita Eagle* in the porch swing. There was a lot I wanted to say, but I didn't know how to go about it, especially with a grownup and especially with Ben's mom. I'd heard that she was quite a talker and that she didn't always get her facts straight. All I could think to say that was safe was, "He's doing just fine."

She was opening the squeaky screen door and she may have said, "Doing fine for himself." But I wasn't sure.

What I was sure about was that Ben acted kinda strange. He was fidgety, and I figured

out why. There'd probably been talk around the supper table, mostly by Ben's mom, and it was about my dad. I knew Ben had always admired my dad because of trouble Ben didn't get into when some folks said he stole stuff from the hardware store. Now he was caught in the middle.

To make it easy on Ben, I said, "That's a nifty new plane, and I'll come back when you fly it."

Then I headed home. Dad and I played two games of Pick Up Sticks. If anything was bothering him, it didn't show. His hand was as steady as a rock. He did let me win a game of checkers, though, and I went to bed happy.

I don't know whether it was the doorbell or a knock that woke me next morning. I heard voices downstairs, so I snuck down to the landing where I could hear but was still out of sight.

Dad said, "What brings you out so early, Mr. Mayor?"

And Mr. Blakely said, "I didn't want to go to your office, Wesley, because people would get the wrong idea. And we've already got too many wrong ideas."

"So this is unofficial?"

The mayor mumbled something, and I heard the thump of cushions as the two men sat down on the davenport and the big chair.

"They pulled a raid last night," the mayor said, "over in Elmdale."

"They?" Dad asked.

"The local police, the sheriff, and some troopers from the highway patrol. The place is like . . . I guess one of those speakeasies we used to read about in Chicago during Prohibition."

"I've heard about one over there," Dad said.

Mr. Blakely laughed. "They arrested a whole bunch of law-abiding citizens."

"Only they weren't so law-abiding."

"Not very." The mayor paused. "The point of all this is that the club had a big liquor inventory. And most of it came from Missouri."

"Oh boy." Dad mulled on that for a while. "That means the bootleggers probably came right through here."

"Missouri's east and Elmdale's west. Right through the middle of town on Main Street or Broadway."

The big chair squeaked, and Dad's footsteps paced the length of the room and back. He sat down again.

"I told you about that farmer I stopped with sacks of grain in his back seat. We stopped half a dozen trucks that looked even a little suspicious. They were loaded with farm equipment,

oilfield machinery, groceries." He heaved a big sigh. "We can't stop everybody."

"Could you try a roadblock? Have you got enough men?"

"We could try one with one car and two or three officers. But every section line is a country road, and anybody could take a whole caravan around a roadblock. Besides, it'd inconvenience a lot of people."

Behind me I heard the tiny squeal of a bare foot on a waxed step. I don't know how long Mom had been standing there, but she was listening, too. I craned my neck and gave her a smile, and she nodded her head. She was dressed, which reminded me that I was still in my pajamas.

"... the people who think you're too lenient," the mayor was saying. "They think you should've demanded prison or reformatory terms for that vandalism last year. And you didn't arrest anybody for the theft at the hardware store."

"There was no case," Dad said. "All we could find was rumor and gossip. If Mrs. Smith and her bunch... well, we've been through that before."

"But not like this. Now these same people are after your scalp. They claim the bootleggers are paying you off under the table. They claim it's a blot on our town that the liquor is

flowing right through and our police are standing by and watching."

It really burned me to think that Mrs. Smith was the one putting ideas like that in Junior's head. No wonder he hollered what he did yesterday. I'd bet that Junior's mom and Ben's mom got together for chin music and... what was it Dad called it? Character assassination? I clamped my jaw and twisted around to look at Mom, and we both shook our heads.

"We're doing our best," Dad said. "There's not much more we can do."

"We've got to think of something. Those biddies are talking about a petition. They're talking recall and special election and I don't know what all."

Dad was silent for a long moment before he chuckled and said, "We might appoint them special deputies."

That's when I heard Mom's footsteps behind me. I don't know when she put on her shoes, but she went downstairs as natural as anything and into the living room and offered Mr. Blakely breakfast or a cup of coffee. He thanked her and said he'd better go before the whole town knew he was there.

Breakfast that morning was fairly glum. Dad didn't jaw at me for not making it to the St. Louis Cardinals yet, and Mom

didn't kid him because he didn't have a Stutz for police car. I couldn't think of anything to say.

When Dad was ready to go, Mom went to the door with him, and they talked in low tones for a minute. Then he patted her on the behind and she kissed him on the cheek, and they both tried to laugh a little.

Mom didn't ask what I was going to do, and she didn't mention any chores. So I went up to my room and tried to figure out what I could do to help Dad.

One thing I could do was go over to Main Street with my magic booze detector and detect which cars were loaded with bootleg hootch. Then I could turn my bike into a motorcycle and go screaming through town after the criminals. Somehow they all turned out to be Junior Smith's dad. And somehow my magic wand wasn't working that day. So I got on my bike and rode downtown to watch for bootleggers.

Main Street was where highway 81 came through town north and south. Bootleggers would sneak through on Broadway where highway 50-S went east and west.

I rode as far west as the Broadway bridge over Sand Creek. I really studied the cars that went past, but none of them looked heavily loaded. There

weren't any trucks other than the ice truck and a load of hay. So I rode east to where all the Santa Fe tracks angled across Broadway.

As railroad crossings went, these weren't bad. But there were so many tracks across a wide street that there had to be rough spots. And some people hit those rough spots as if they'd never driven the street before. Oh, there was some bouncing around in back seats and some mighty surprised people.

That's about when Billy Porter came along and asked if he could ride my bike to the store for his mom. Since he had a low front tire, I let him go. I leaned his bike against a telephone pole and sat down on the curb to watch cars. It was almost as good as going to the picture show. By the time Billy got back, I was an expert. At least that's what I told him.

An empty truck hit that crossing and like to have bounced clear off the street. Then the Jergens family came along. All six of them were in the car, and they took those tracks like a canoe on the creek.

"See?" I said. "You get that much weight in the car and you flatten out the springs."

"And you take the railroad crossing real smooth."

That was the idea. "So if a bootlegger came across here and

... well, if the front end of the car bounced high and the back end was low down and smooth ...

"Like if somebody's got hundred-pound bags of grain in the back seat?"

That wasn't the idea. "I suppose that story's all over town. And making my dad look bad."

"Yeah." Billy turned away from me and shuffled his feet. "Junior says your old man's gotta arrest somebody and so he's trying to make that farmer look guilty."

"Darn that Junior," I said. "Let's just watch ..."

And here came a Ford V-8 with the front end tilted up. When it got closer, I saw that it was the police car. Dad was driving, and Alvin, one of his officers, was with him. That Ford hit the railroad tracks like Mrs. Shearer dressed for church—nose in the air and big bottom gliding smooth.

Billy just murmured, "Oh boy."

"Maybe it is hundred-pound bags," I said. And I knew I had to prove the point. "Let's follow the car and find out."

Billy's front tire was still low, so I rode him on my bike. The police car was a block ahead, but it was headed straight for the police station. We got there in time to see Dad and Alvin go up the steps and into the office.

I steered my bike right up beside the police car and got a foot on the runningboard. We didn't even have to look a second time. Lined up across the back seat were four cases of whisky.

"Oh, gee," Billy said.

I couldn't say anything. It felt like a baseball stuck in my throat, and my heart pounded. fit to bust.

"Oh, gee," Billy said. "We better get outa here."

He didn't wait. He slid off the bar of my bike and took off running. At Main Street he had to wait for a car to pass, and I saw Junior Smith talking to him. Or trying to. Billy hardly slowed down. He headed in the direction of his bike.

I pushed away from the Ford and rode off in the other direction. When I glanced back over my shoulder, I saw Junior headed for the police car. That news would be all over town before supertime.

All I could do was ride out to City Park and cruise around, sit in a swing for a minute and trail my bike along the creek, all the time trying to sort out what I had seen.

I knew my dad couldn't be in cahoots with the bootleggers or with anybody crooked. And if he was, he wouldn't be dumb enough to park the evidence right in front of the police station in the middle of town. And

he sure wouldn't have one of his officers along as witness to his doing something wrong.

Or would he?

Everybody knew that policemen didn't get paid a lot. In the movies, guys like Al Capone were richer than anybody, and they had suitcases full of money to bribe cops and judges.

Maybe that's what paid for my bike a long time ago. I didn't have a new fielder's glove like Junior Smith, but I hadn't missed any meals. And some people had.

All of a sudden my mind raced through a hundred scenes from movies where a cop went bad, where money was too big and honesty too weak, where loyalty went out the window and trouble came in. There was one movie where Edward G. Robinson said that any man could be bought. And another one where a crooked James Cagney shot a crooked cop.

And then I almost cried. Leaning on my bike, in City Park, beside Sand Creek, I thought of my dad, and I had to sniff hard to keep from crying. I knew he couldn't be dishonest, but I'd seen the whisky in the back seat of his car. I knew he couldn't do anything wrong, but I'd read in the paper that he didn't arrest very many bootleggers.

That's when I heard the yelling and the laughing. Over

toward Broadway a bunch of guys on bicycles were headed into the park, whooping it up like they had just won a ballgame. They were close enough that I recognized Junior Smith and three of his buddies from the other side of town.

"There he is," Junior hollered. He pointed at me.

All four of the guys stood up to pedal hard right in my direction. I knew they figured on razzing me, but I didn't know what else. And I wasn't sure what to do. If I was mad enough, I could maybe beat up Junior, but I sure couldn't take on four of them at one time.

What I did know was that I was fast on my bike. I waited until the four of them came across a patch of grass toward me. That's when I hopped on my bike and took off up the footpath toward Broadway.

They hollered, "Crooked cop's kid" and "Coward" and "Run like your dad does." But then they must've run out of wind. They were pumping as hard as they could go, but I had the jump on them and I kept pulling away. By the time I got halfway to downtown, they yelled a few more things and gave up the chase.

Well, I rode around our part of town, going nowhere special. Just riding. And thinking. I knew there had to be an expla-

nation for Dad's having that booze in the police car and for not arresting more bootleggers. All I had to do was figure it all out.

Every car I saw and every truck that went past, I gave them a good, hard look. There was something I was trying to think out, something I needed to pin down, and I couldn't make it come clear in my dumb old head.

Eventually I rode home for dinner. When I went in the front door, I could smell the Spanish rice and porkchops. Dad had got there ahead of me, and he and Mom were talking in the kitchen as usual.

"How many cases?" Mom asked.

"There were twenty cases on the truck," Dad said. "The highway patrolman said that'd put a dent in business in Elmdale. He didn't have room for it all in his car, so Alvin and I brought what we could." He laughed. "There must be some pretty tippy fish in Sand Creek by now."

"You emptied it all?"

"Had to do something. We were sure overloaded."

That's when I began to sort out what it was I'd been trying to think. I washed my hands at the sink and then sat down at the table across from Dad. I said, "What kind of springs do they put on a truck?"

"You mean overload springs?"
"Could you put them on a car?"

He thought about that. "No reason you couldn't."

"Then," I said, "you could haul heavy stuff in a car and it wouldn't ride real low at the back end."

"Not if you wanted to go to all that trouble."

That was one thing I was thinking. Then I asked the other. "How long would it take to drive to Missouri and back?"

"Depends on where in Missouri," Dad said. "Most of a day there and the same amount to get back."

And then I knew. Or thought I knew. But I didn't know exactly how to say it or even if I should. Mom served up our plates and Dad asked the blessing, and I ate the rice and the porkchop and tried to decide what I ought to do.

Mom asked, "What's the talk at City Hall today?"

"The usual gossip and rumor."

"You know what I mean."

Dad sighed and put down his knife. "I guess Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Long are taking their petition around."

"Are they getting any signatures?"

"A few," Dad said. "They sure are determined to get rid of me."

"I keep wondering why," Mom said.

Dad shook his head. "I wish I knew."

"Will they get enough signatures to do anything?"

"No," I said. And I was surprised at myself speaking out like that. "No, they won't."

"Oh?" Mom said.

"I saw the car yesterday," I said, "all hiked up in the back. And I bet it'll come through town tomorrow and it'll be riding level."

Dad looked at me and his face was serious. "Do you know something I should know?"

"You watch for him tomorrow."

"Who?"

"Junior Smith's dad's big Buick."

"Why?"

"Because I bet he's got overload springs. And when the car is riding level, the trunk is full of booze. Maybe the back seat, too."

Mom's face got those worry lines between the eyes. She said, "Mr. Smith's Buick?"

Dad just said, "Hmmm." He looked at me for a minute and said, "You saw the car yesterday?"

"Going through downtown."

"If he went to Missouri, he could get back this afternoon."

"I guess so."

Dad went to the hall and picked up the phone. Then he

put it back down and grinned at me and patted Mom and went on out the back door. The police car backed down the drive and into the street, and that's the last we saw of Dad till supper.

But he explained it all then. Sure enough, Junior's dad came through town, headed for Elm-dale, and his big Buick rode as level as a battleship. Dad and Alvin stopped him. He had four cases of whisky in the trunk, four more in the back seat, and four on the floor in back.

"Oh my goodness," Mom said. "What in the world will happen to him now?"

"I just arrest the wrongdoers," Dad said. "I don't prosecute them."

Mom kinda sighed and moaned at the same time. "Oh, that poor woman. Poor Mrs. Smith."

"And poor Junior," I said in as sarcastic a tone as I could manage. "Poor ol' Junior."

"Edward," Mom said softly. "You don't mean that."

I did, but all of a sudden I didn't. I remembered Junior from baseball yesterday and from him and his buddies on their bikes and the way he yelled about Dad and about me. But then I remembered how I felt when they said bad things about my dad, and I knew how I felt when I thought some of those things might be true.

"Junior's going to need a friend," Dad said.

Mom agreed.

"He's going to need a good example," she said.

That's when everything kind of ran together in my head. The last thing I wanted was to be a friend to Junior Smith. But I remembered too many sharp pains. I took a deep breath and

I swallowed hard and I said, "Maybe Junior could come over for supper and stay all night."

"Maybe he could," Mom said.

Dad said, "And maybe I'll take you both for double-dip ice cream cones."

I guess some clouds do have silver linings. I said, "Maybe he'll let me play with his new fielder's glove."

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TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

Why pay for cellular phone service if you only want it for emergency use?

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Emergency assistance.

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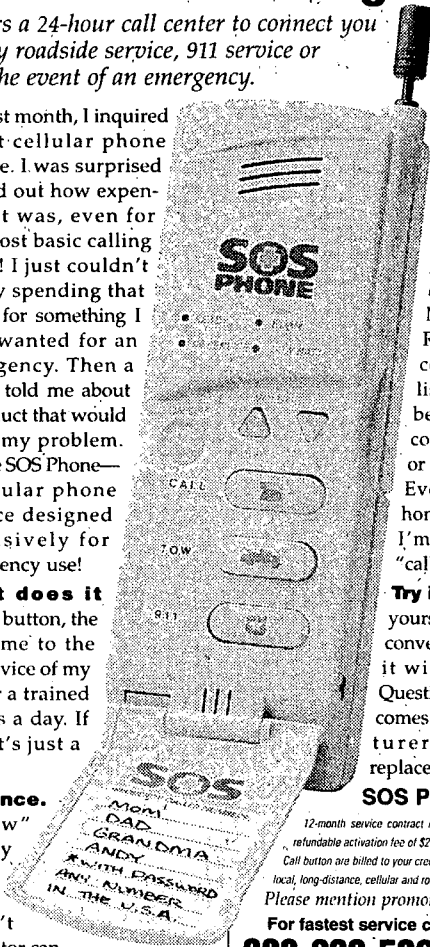
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do? With the touch of a button, the SOS Phone connects me to the roadside emergency service of my choice, a 911 service or a trained SOS operator, 24 hours a day. If I need help, I know it's just a phone call away.

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Lin Po and the Ghost Wedding

B. H. Schrier

Deputy Inspector Lin Po steered his bicycle toward home. The streets were a tangle not only from the homeward rush but because it was the fifteenth day of the seventh month, the height of the Hungry Ghost Festival.

Bonfires brightened the intersections, and flares reddened the river bank. He was nearly home when a blind man stepped in front of him. The sudden stop nearly caused Lin Po to fall.

"Ho, grandfather! You should not walk alone in this traffic."

"How else would I get a policeman to stop?" The man was not so old, perhaps fifty, and he gripped Lin's arm with the strength of a younger man.

The deputy inspector pushed his cycle against the wall of a shop. "You need a policeman? To what purpose?"

"Some evil person has murdered my daughter." The blind man tapped his stick on the pavement. "You will come to my apartment?"

"Of course." Lin Po had no reason to hurry home. There was no one waiting for him.

It wasn't far, and only two flights of steps. He met the man's wife, a cheerful woman who promptly retreated to the kitchen and began to cook. Mr. Tam invited him to stay for supper.

"It would be an honor. But first, what about the murder? Your daughter, you said. When did this occur?"

"Six years ago." Mr. Tam poured tea.

"Six years? You wait until now to report it?"

"Oh no. We just now learned the cause of her death." Tam looked at his wife. "We each had the same dream, three nights in a row."

"Yes," said the smiling woman. She served the first course. "Tam Li appeared to us. She was bewitched, she says."

"Ah." Lin Po filled his mouth with stuffed dumpling to avoid speaking. He would not offend these simple people by saying what he thought of their superstitions.

"She told me to go to the street." Mr. Tam served himself from the dish of pepper sauce. "She would point out the right policeman to me as he drove by."

"So. You are fortunate I drive a bicycle and not a Mercedes."

"Oh yes. She said you would come to the house and she would tell you where to look."

"Look for what?" Lin Po almost laughed.

"She didn't say." He shrugged and glanced at his wife.

In between courses, Mr. Tam and his wife filled in the story, how their daughter once was happily betrothed to a fine young man. How a few weeks before the wedding day she was suddenly taken ill.

"She just wasted away, the doctors don't know why." Mrs. Tam brought more food.

"Ah. And what happened to the young man?" Standard police procedure is to suspect those closest to the victim.

"Oh, after a year he married another. My daughter's best friend, in fact." She looked at him from beneath her eyebrows as she took away a dish. "Her name is Soo Yin."

Nothing more of importance was said, and he thanked his hosts three times for their hospitality. It was the best food Lin Po had eaten in some time.

He might not have pursued the matter, since he always had plenty to do. But Lin Po couldn't keep the story from his mind. That night he too dreamt of a beautiful young woman. She beckoned him to follow her to a walled garden and inside to a gardener's hut. This garden had a curious moon gate, two wrought-iron dragons worked into the bars.

The next day he was sent to one of the precincts in the inner city to identify a jailbreaker. On his return, he lost his way and came to a street with no outlet, where high walls protected the houses inside. On turning around he recognized a gate in the garden wall. It was the moon gate of his dream.

He tried to leave, but the chain jumped off the sprocket and he took the machine over the curb to work on it. Through the gate he saw, at the door of a gardener's hut, the woman of his dream. She beckoned to him.

The gate wasn't locked, which is unusual in any city today. As he approached, the woman entered the hut and passed from his view. When he looked in, there was no one to be seen and no other way in or out.

Dusk was approaching. He used his flashlight to search every corner of the hut. He saw nothing but garden tools and clay pots. The sound of sheet metal buckling drew his attention to a metal tub in-

verted in a corner. Under the tub was the shell of a crab, a land crab, long dead.

Two things were curious about this crab. One of its claws was tied to a peg driven deep in the hard clay soil that made the floor. As a result of this cruelty, the creature had starved to death.

The other was the characters painted on the animal's back. They made a name.

Tam Li.

Lin Po considered himself an educated man, a loyal follower of Mao, a man devoid of all superstition. But the incident of the crab was evidence of Hak Tao, the Black Way, the practice of which was strictly against the law.

One could not deny that such witches existed, preying on the ignorant and the gullible. There was no doubt that some among them were unscrupulous, those who would cast a spell for a price, and assure its effect with a little sugar of lead or ground glass.

That night the young woman appeared again in his dreams. The next morning, after making discreet inquiries, he found that the owners of the dragon-gate house were the family Soo, and it was the home of a powerful judge.

Further inquiry disclosed that young Soo Yin and her husband had separated, having applied for a divorce. The young man had returned to the home of his parents, where he soon died of a wasting disease.

Lin Po went at once to a Sam Ku or Third Aunt, a "woman of wisdom," and told her the story.

"I want you to be present when I show this woman the evidence. You need not say anything at all. But after, you will tell me what you think."

He left a small gift for the fey woman and rode his bike to the fish market, where he bought two live crabs and a large washtub. Because of the bulk of his purchases, he had to walk the 'cycle home, balancing the tub on the handlebars.

Soo Yin was a haughty woman who had a cruel, pouting sort of beauty. She was brought to the police station by a Warrant of Inquiry, served by a constable of police. After keeping her waiting for an hour, Lin Po had her brought to a small room.

There were no chairs in this closet of a room, only a folding table supporting a rusty galvanized washtub. Inside the tub was the dead crab, with its string and peg, but Lin Po never spoke of it.

Instead he stood with the tub between them and fired questions at Soo Yin. Was she a witch? Did she seek the company of witches? Had she ever hired a Little People Hitter? A follower of the Black Way? A devotee of Shiva or any evil spirit? Had she ever bought any poisons? Had she done anything to make her estranged husband ill? And all the time the Sam Ku stood there with her arms folded, staring at Soo Yin, saying nothing.

As he expected, the frightened woman denied any wrongdoing and hedged her answers to pointed questions. After two hours of this, Lin Po told her she could go.

Before she could reach the door, the Sam Ku took a second tub from the floor and placed it on the table.

"Look at the future, woman," said Lin Po.

Inside the tub were two live crabs, one larger than the other. The large one had the name Tam Li painted on its shell. The smaller bore the name of Soo Yin. The pouting girl could not take her eyes from them.

"They have no food," he said. "Soon they will be very hungry, and they will fight. I wonder which will win?"

When Soo Yin was shown out, the Sam Ku looked at the deputy inspector.

"She is the one, and she only."

Lin Po locked the little room and pocketed the key.

In three days the Soo family took their daughter to the hospital. She was having a violent seizure and was in considerable pain. At the hospital, before witnesses, she confessed to casting a spell on her best friend, and on her stolen husband as well. Then, quite suddenly, she died.

Lin Po did not learn of this until the next day. In the press of other investigations, he had forgotten the locked room, and he hurried there, thinking to set the innocent creatures free.

He was too late. The larger crab had killed the smaller and picked its shell clean.

Lin Po made another visit to the house of the Tam family, this time to attend a wedding. The Sam Ku was to join the spirits of Tam Li and her lover in marriage. It was much like any marriage ceremony except that the wedding gifts were paper. At the end of the ceremony the gifts were burned, and much paper money, too.

A ghost wedding was rank superstition, of course, but good man-

ners required that he attend. Also, Mrs. Tam was an excellent cook, and Lin Po lived alone, cooking for himself. Then, too, the Hungry Ghost Festival was nearly over. Though Chairman Mao explained that such things do not exist, the prudent person would take care not to offend a ghost.

Just in case.

Stop, Thief!

Dan Sontup

I nod to Howie, walk over to the bar, ease myself onto a stool at the end, and put a five dollar bill on the bar. I'm the only customer, but then it's only nine in the morning. Too early even for the winos. Howie gets out a beer and sets the bottle down in front of me.

"How about a glass?" I ask as he picks up my money.

Howie's eyebrows lift, putting several more wrinkles in his forehead. The rest of his bald head barely shines in the dim lighting. "I'm trying to save money, Arnold," Howie says. "One less glass I gotta wash. Water bill's getting too high." He rings up the five and puts a dollar bill and two quarters back in front of me.

"And you're getting cheaper every day," I say, taking a long swallow from the bottle. My lips make a big sucking sound when I finally take it away from my mouth.

"And you still got no manners. You should learn to drink a little more quiet and not make disgusting noises like that."

"Gimme a glass," I shoot back at him, "and you won't hear any noise."

Now, all this might sound like two old friends ragging each other. It's not. Howie and I don't have that kind of relationship. What it's really like is that Howie's place is where guys like me hang out and get leads, mostly through Howie, for jobs that Howie helps line up for us.

What kind of jobs? Not exactly what you'd call an honest day's work.

Howie's the contact man. He's not a friend to anybody.

Howie says, "He hasn't come in yet. You're early."

"Yeah, I know. Point him out when he gets here. I want a look at him before he knows I'm the one."

Howie shrugs, swipes at the bar with a rag, and walks away.

I take another swallow of my beer. It's dim and cool in the bar. Outside, the July sun is really beating down. My colorful Hawaiian shirt that Cheri gave to me is sticking to my back. I wonder if it's hotter right now in Hawaii than here in central Ohio.

Cheri has always wanted to live in Hawaii. I miss her, even though she's been in the town

jail less than a week. Our lawyer has said he's working on getting her out soon, but he isn't sure he can beat the shoplifting charge, since this is the second time for her.

Cheri and me are not what you might call the most successful petty crime couple, but then maybe our luck's about to change. From the little Howie's told me, the man I'm going to meet is not without funds, lots of funds from the way Howie sized up his appearance. Aside from that, Howie's told me only that the man heard Howie had certain kinds of contacts and had approached him, looking for someone who could pull a small but very simple and profitable job for him. A heist, Howie gathered.

Since Howie has been getting a little antsy about me always trying to run a tab with him, which Howie always turns down with a snort of contempt, he figures why not throw the job my way. At least I might have more ready cash to spend in his place, he tells me. Also, Howie figures, a safe and simple job might not be too much for even someone like me to handle. He tells me this with a curl of his lip when he sets up the meet for today. Howie likes to curl his lip a lot, especially when he talks to me. Well, I say to him, it takes a petty thief to know one, don't it?

That's a pretty lame comeback, I know, since Howie made enough out of his petty theft in the past to buy this bar. Maybe someday Cheri and I can get ourselves a small bar, too, I think. It could happen.

The door opens. I don't turn around. I check the backbar mirror. It has to be him. He's carrying an attaché case, and he's wearing a white double-breasted suit and a white Panama hat, I can see that much. It's too dark in the bar for me to make out his face in the reflection. Howie's cheapness extends to his electric bill. But I deduce that anyone wearing the kind of *el jefe* outfit that this man is sporting on such a hot day has to be rich enough to be driving around in a big air-conditioned car, which I also deduce must be outside at a good distance from my beatup, dirty old Chevy. I also bet he's even wearing white shoes.

While I'm congratulating myself on my powers of deduction, as well as on remembering some of the street Spanish I've picked up, Howie grunts, catches my eye in the mirror, and rubs his nose. I get the signal. I still don't turn around. I watch in the mirror while the man nods at Howie and Howie makes a quick motion with his hand, indicating one of the booths off to one side and way

in the back. The man goes to the booth and puts the attaché case down on the table.

I wait a moment, then pick up my beer from the bar and carry the bottle with me as I make my way to the booth. I'm right. He's wearing white shoes.

I slide onto the seat opposite him and say, "I'm Arnold."

He stares at me from under his Panama hat. I can't see his eyes. They're in the shadow of the hatbrim. I've been half expecting to see a thin pencil mustache, sort of going along with the white-suit image, but he's clean shaven. He has a weak chin, though, and a pointed nose.

"I'm Mr. Michaelson," he says. His voice is little more than a whisper.

I nod and say nothing, waiting.

"You're a redhead," he says finally.

"No kidding. What was your first clue?" I get my back up when people pull a remark like that on me.

"It's a bright red," he says.

"It's even brighter out in the sun," I say, wondering how far he's going to carry this line of talk. "I've even been told I'm a flaming redhead. So what's it to you?"

"You sort of . . . well, stand out." His eyes go from my hair to my Hawaiian shirt.

I think I get his drift. "Don't worry," I tell him. "I wear a baseball cap and dark clothing when I work."

He nods slowly like he's carefully considering what I've just said.

"Work," I say again, prodding him. "You got some work you want me to do?"

He waits a moment longer. I can feel his eyes studying me, but I still can't see them clearly under the hatbrim. Finally he says, still in that whisper, "Did the bartender tell you what it was about?"

"A heist."

"What?"

"A burglary. You want something stolen, right?"

"Well . . . yes, in a sense."

"I don't do armed robbery," I say quickly. "I never carry a piece."

"That's fine. I prefer it that way."

I take a swallow of my beer. "So what's the job, huh?"

He doesn't answer me right away, and I suddenly realize what I've been saying to this guy, spilling my guts. Cheri says I never learn to keep my mouth shut. She's right this time. This guy might be wired even as we speak.

"Listen," I say, "I don't know you and . . . well, I don't think I want to keep talking about things like this until . . ."

"Until what?"

"You a cop?" I ask abruptly. Silly question, of course.

"That's a silly question," he says, like he's been reading my mind.

"Yeah, well, maybe it is," I answer. "Are you?"

"Are you?"

I'm about to say something like "I asked you first," but that would be even sillier. I clamp my mouth shut and glare at him.

"I'm not," he says.

"Me neither," I tell him.

He sits quietly, not moving, his hands folded in front of him on the table. Then he reaches up, takes off his hat, and sets it carefully on top of his attaché case. I can see now that his eyes are dark, maybe black or a real deep brown, hard to tell in the low lighting. He's got slicked-back black hair.

"I'm sure the bartender checked me out when we talked before," he says, still in that same whispery voice. I wonder if he's trying to disguise it.

"So?" I say.

"He must have made certain to his own satisfaction that I'm not with the police, wouldn't you say?"

"Yeah, I'd say that about Howie."

"And I guess," he says, "I can assume that Howie would have

also checked you out, too, uh . . . Arnold, isn't it?"

"Howie and me go way back," I say, then add, "Mr. Michaelson, isn't it?" to let him know I can play this look-down-your-nose game too. His lips twitch like he's about to smile, but it never turns into that. "So I guess we have to trust each other, having gone this far?"

"Guess so," I say. "Now, suppose we quit playing games and get down to business. What kind of job you got in mind?"

"It's a simple one," he says.

I ignore the insult, if that's what he's trying to do.

"I want you to make it look like something's been stolen from my house," he says, his voice even more of a whisper now.

I stare at him. "You mean fake it?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

He shrugs.

"You don't want to tell me why?"

He shrugs again.

I reach for my beer and start to slide out of the booth. "Then we got no more to talk about, Mr. Michaelson."

"Wait!" He's not whispering any more. I guess this is what he really sounds like because saying something quick and anxious like what he just called out to me, a person could forget

himself and speak in his natural voice.

I slide back into the booth and take a swallow of my beer and set the bottle back on the table and look at him.

"I—I don't want to give you too many details," he says, not whispering now. "The less you know, the better . . . for your protection as well as for mine."

"I gotta know what I'm getting into," I say, then throw in, "for my own protection . . . as well as for yours," giving his own words right back at him. I even drop my voice at the end and whisper like he was doing. He doesn't get it. Maybe this time I'm being too subtle for him. He nods his head slowly and says, "What I want you to do is to make it look like my home's been broken into and something of value stolen from a wall safe inside."

I wait.

"It's my wife's ring," he says finally.

I say nothing.

"It—it's quite valuable," he says. "So what I want you to do is to make sure that—"

"How valuable?" I say, cutting him off.

He bites his lip. "Quarter of a million dollars," he whispers. "Diamonds and emeralds set in platinum."

I've been around long enough to guess the rest of it. I grin at

him and say, "Insured, of course, right?"

"Well . . . yes."

I keep on grinning, and I can see he knows that I know.

"I—I've got a cash-flow problem," he says.

"That's the usual reason for scamming the insurance company."

He looks away from me, then down at his hands.

"So you want me to fake a heist," I say. "You collect from the insurance company and later maybe sell the ring—if your wife lets you."

"It's already sold," he says glumly, and I'm guessing he can see I'm wise to the scam and he's decided there's no point in holding anything back.

"Not to a legitimate dealer," I say.

"No, of course not."

His answer tells me even more than he realizes.

"A fence, right?"

He nods.

"Howie set it up for you?" I say, making a stab at what likely happened.

He nods again.

"Let me tell you how I figure this whole thing went down," I say. "If you took the ring to a fence right at the start, this means you were planning the scam all along. If all you wanted was to solve a small cash-flow problem, then you could have

sold the ring to a legitimate dealer. But no, you decided right from the start you had to double the deal—sell the ring and also collect on the insurance.” I lean back in the booth and pause to let it sink in with him how much I’m on top of everything; then I hit him with the zinger. “And now you gotta come to someone like me to make it all look real for the insurance company.”

He doesn’t say anything, just sits there looking down at his hands.

I figure I’ve got him where I want him now. “It’ll cost you, Michaelson,” I tell him.

He looks up at me. “How much?”

“Ten big ones.” I hope he can’t see I’m holding my breath. This kind of loot is way out of my usual take on a job. But I figure I can bluff him out of it.

“That’s far too much,” he says quickly. “I told you it was a simple job.”

“You don’t know nothing about this kind of work,” I say, making my voice hard. “Let me spell it out for you. First, I gotta break into your house and then—” A thought hits me. “You got an alarm system in your house?”

“Yes, but—”

“That adds to the risk,” I tell him before he can go on. “Not only do I have to use a safe man to blow the safe for me, but I

have to make sure he can also disable the alarm; otherwise I’ll need two extra guys. That kind of help on a job don’t come cheap. I gotta figure on shelling out at least five for the alarm and safe job. That leaves five for me, which I don’t mind telling you is the going rate these days.” I’m really winging it here because this is so far out of my league I really don’t know what the rate is or where I’ll get the kind of help I’ll need to pull off the job. But he doesn’t know that. I figure this is my one chance to move up to the big time, which most important of all to me means enough money to get the kind of legal help that’ll keep Cheri out of jail. She’s worth the risk.

He shakes his head. “I told you it was a simple job. You’ll run no risk at all, and you can do the whole thing in less than two minutes.”

I let my breath out slowly, hoping he won’t hear it. This is something I hadn’t expected. He’s got something up his sleeve, I tell myself. Gotta be careful here.

“Less than two minutes?” I say, stalling while I try to figure things out.

“That’s right, Arnold.” There’s more confidence in his voice now. “And as I said, it’s a simple job. Forget about the alarm on my house. I want it to go off.”

I stare at him. He smiles back at me. I can feel a little prickling on the top of my head, a sort of built-in warning my instinct has developed over the years.

"You want me to break into your house and have the alarm go off? You got security lights, too?"

He nods. "The motion sensors will turn on the lights when you're within a few feet of the house. Don't worry about it. Nobody in that neighborhood pays too much attention right away. Dogs and cats and other animals often set off the lights." He gives me another smile. "You won't get caught, I promise you."

"Why not?"

"Two reasons. First, it'll take the security company some time to confirm the alarm and then send a car out to investigate. You'll be long gone by then. Second, you won't be actually breaking into the house. All you have to do is to use a small crowbar and break the glass panels on the rear door. You'll need to use a crowbar because the panels are heavy glass. That will set off the alarm, and later, when the police check the scene, the glass from the door will be on the inside, showing that the glass was broken from the outside. You following me so far, Arnold?"

I say nothing, waiting. The prickling on the top of my head

is getting stronger. I reach up and scratch it.

"After you break the glass," he goes on, "you unlatch the door and push it open, but you don't go inside. You drop the crowbar for the police to find—I assume you know enough to wear gloves so you won't leave fingerprints—and after that, you do one other small thing. Then the job's done, and you take off. Less than two minutes for all this, wouldn't you say?"

"Depends on what's this 'other small thing' I gotta do."

"Good question, Arnold," he says, like he's patting me on the head. He takes his white Panama hat off the attaché case and puts the hat back on his head, fixes the brim just so with his hands, and then opens the case. He reaches inside and takes out two manila envelopes, the kind with metal clasps that close the top flap. He sets them down on the table. One of the envelopes makes a thunking sound. There's something heavy inside.

He picks up the heavy envelope, opens it, and reaches inside. He takes out a shiny metal box with something red on top of it. The box is a little larger than a cigarette pack. He holds the box up and shows it to me, and I can see that the red thing is some kind of small plastic bar covering something else underneath it. "This is the other little

thing you'll have to do to finish the job," he says. "It's a remote device. After you break the glass on the rear door, you flip up this guard." He pulls up the red plastic bar, and I can see a black button underneath. "Then you press this button just once." He shows me how. "Remember, press only once. After that you're done. You get out of there fast."

"What happens when I press the button?" I ask.

"Nothing, not right away. As I told you, this is a remote. It has an effective range of about fifty yards. When you press the button, it will activate a time-delay device inside the house. This time-delay is part of a relay attached magnetically to the door of the wall safe inside our bedroom. Alongside and wired into the relay is a small amount of plastic explosive. Four minutes after you press the button, the relay will close and the plastic explosive will go off, blowing open the safe door. By this time, of course, you'll be safely on your way." He flips down the red guard on the remote, sits back, and gives me a smug look. "Fast and simple, right?" I say nothing, trying to sort out what he's said and wondering why the top of my head is still prickling.

"Okay," I say, "I can see why you'd want a delay there. Give me time to get away. Just how

loud is this explosion going to be? You got neighbors close enough to hear it, maybe?"

He shakes his head. "Not too loud, and my neighbors are not that close. But it's best to be safe, right?"

"Yeah," I say. "So all I gotta do is smash the back door glass with the crowbar, set off the remote, and then leave?" I reach up and scratch the top of my head.

"Right. That's all you have to do."

"What do I do with that?" I say, and I point to the remote control.

He shrugs. "Drop it down a sewer later, throw it in a dumpster, it doesn't matter?"

"Suppose the cops find it?"

"So what? Made it myself," he says proudly. "Used standard parts from several different big and busy electronics stores so it can never be traced, not to me and certainly not to someone like you. Even if they find it and then somehow connect it to the break-in, it'll just show that the thieves used a simple remote to blow the safe. Makes no difference if they find it or not."

"What's in the other envelope?" I ask, pointing to it.

"Payment for the job, half of it in advance. Five hundred dollars."

I stare at him. I can't see his eyes because he's got the Pana-

ma hat on again, but I know he's staring right back at me.

"Not enough," I say.

"It's more than enough, Arnold. You certainly didn't think I would pay you ten thousand for such a simple job?"

"No, but—"

"The only reason I need someone like you," he cuts me off, "is to break open one door and press one button while I establish an alibi for me and my wife. There's no real risk involved. A thousand is a generous payment for something so simple and safe, wouldn't you say?"

I clamp my mouth shut and stare at him.

"I won't pay more than this, Arnold," he tells me. "You'll get the second half after the job is done."

I'm thinking of Cheri in the town jail and of how the thousand will at least be enough for the bail bondsman if our lawyer does his job right, and I know I'm up against the wall. Maybe I'll think of something later. I say, "Okay," and reach for the envelope with the money.

He pulls it away from me before I can grab hold of it. "We're almost done, Arnold," he says. "Give me a moment here."

He pulls a handkerchief from his breast pocket and carefully and slowly wipes the money envelope on all sides. He does the same with the other envelope.

Then he wipes the remote control and, holding it in the handkerchief, shoves it inside the envelope and closes the clasp and wipes the envelope again. He reaches inside his jacket and pulls out a ballpoint pen. He uses the tip of the pen to push the two envelopes across the table to me.

I open the money envelope and look inside. There's a bunch of fifties in there. I reach inside and, without taking the money out, count it. The five hundred is all there.

"How do I get the rest of it?" I ask.

"I'll leave another envelope with Howie after the job is done. You can pick it up then."

I look over at Howie, still standing behind the bar with his arms folded. I shake my head hard. "No. I don't trust him."

"Why not?"

"I don't want Howie involved in this any more than he is now."

"So what do you suggest?"

"I want the money from you personally, just like we're doing now."

He thinks about this for a moment, then says, "All right. Here's how we'll arrange the whole thing. This Thursday, two days from now, you go out to my place at ten o'clock at night. Don't make it any earlier than

that. My wife and I will be at a dance at the country club by then, mingling with all our friends, setting up our alibi. You do your job at the house and get out of there fast. I'll meet you the next night, Friday, and I'll have the second five hundred for you. That all right with you?"

I give it some thought. "Sounds okay to me."

"Where do you want to meet?" he asks.

"What about right here?"

He glances over at Howie. "I thought you didn't trust him."

"He doesn't have to know anything about it," I say. "We meet here at, say, nine at night. You give me the money, and we both go on our way."

He nods his head slowly. "All right, we'll do it that way. One thing, though."

"Yeah?"

"Howie knows how to reach you, doesn't he?"

"Sure. He arranged this meet, didn't he? What're you getting at?"

"If something goes wrong before Thursday night, if there has to be any change in plans, I'll ask Howie to get in touch with you and let you know there's been a new development and you're not to go ahead with what we talked about. I won't have to tell him what it is, just that he should contact you with the message. You do the same if

something unexpected comes up at your end. You call Howie. I've got an unlisted number, so you can only reach me through Howie. That sound all right to you?"

"Yeah, that's okay."

"You understand, this is just in case we have to postpone the job?"

I nod. "Sure."

"It doesn't mean you get to keep the five hundred."

I give him a big grin. I can see he doesn't exactly like what I might be thinking, but he knows that's a chance he's got to take.

I give him a few more moments to let this sink in, then say, "Write down your address so I'll know where the house is."

He shakes his head slowly and gives me a thin smile, which tells me he's not about to put anything in writing. "Listen carefully, Arnold," he says. "Five fifty-two Andrews Lane." He says it again. "That's my home address. You got it?"

I repeat it for him—twice.

"Then we're done here," he says, and picks up his attaché case and slides out of the booth. He stands there looking down at me. "Thursday night," he says. "Do it at ten o'clock." Then he turns and walks away and out the door.

I wait just a moment, then go to the front window and look

outside at the parking lot. He's just pulling out in his car. It's a Caddy. White, of course.

"Everything all set?" Howie calls out behind me.

I don't even turn around. "Yeah," I say to the front window, then walk to the door and go out.

Our lawyer is an old geezer, not too fast on his feet like some of these young ones, but he's honest and works hard and he manages to get Cheri out on bail after I give him the five hundred I got from Michaelson. This leaves Cheri and me real low on funds, but it's worth it to get her back and into my arms.

We cuddle together that night in the small room we rent by the week, and our pillow talk is mostly about my meeting with Michaelson and what I got to do for him. The top of Cheri's blonde head doesn't prickle her like mine does, but she's got the same instinctive feeling like me that everything's not exactly kosher here.

We go over it and back and forth on it for a long time, but we can't pin down anything definite. There's just the feeling both of us have that the job is not as safe and simple as Michaelson says it is.

She falls asleep in my arms, and I hold her and try to sleep but my eyes are wide open. I

keep thinking about the job I've got to pull on Thursday and the fact that our lawyer has said he thinks he can get the supermarket to drop the shoplifting charges against Cheri, but I know that's going to take more than the second five hundred I'll collect from Michaelson—if he doesn't welsh out on me. And then I think about Cheri and how she's so desperate for us to go straight and make a clean start in Hawaii, which right now is about as far away as the moon for us.

I finally fall asleep, smelling the perfume of Cheri's hair, and in my dreams it's like the smell of those Hawaiian flowers they hang around your neck when you step off the plane.

There's been no message from Howie calling the whole thing off, so on Thursday night, a little before ten, Cheri and I are parked in the old Chevy on the street opposite Michaelson's house. I have on a baseball cap and dark clothing, and we're both a little edgy. But we've spent hours thinking and talking about the job and going over and over it again, and Cheri, who's got a sharp mind when she really tries, has come up with something that makes sense in a way. We've worked out a plan of action,

and I know what I've got to do.

I look at her and then at my watch. It's time to go. I slip on my gloves and pick up the small crowbar from the floor of the car. Cheri hands me the remote control, and I give her a quick kiss on her soft lips and then I'm out of the car and moving fast.

It takes just a moment for me to slip around the back of the house. The security lights flash on, just like Michaelson has warned me, and I keep going until I come to the back door with the heavy glass panels. I don't waste a second. I swing hard with the crowbar, and it takes only two blows to break the glass. I hear a buzzer going off inside. I use the crowbar to clear away what's left of the broken glass, drop the crowbar, reach in and unlatch the door, and push it open. The sound of the buzzer is louder now. I grab hold of the remote—and in a few seconds the job is done.

I turn and run like hell for the car. My heart is pounding in my chest. Cheri sees me coming. She's behind the wheel now and starts the car and reaches across and opens the passenger-side door for me. I get in and slam the door, and before it's even latched, Cheri is spinning the car out of there.

She's not only got brains and is beautiful, she's also one hell of a driver. Even so, we're not out

of sight of the house when there's a loud boom, and I see a flash of light inside the house and hear glass breaking. I look at Cheri. She gives me a frightened glance, then looks back at the road, concentrating hard on her driving. The plastic explosive went off a lot sooner than Michaelson had said it would. Was it just something that went a little wrong in the timing—or did Michaelson plan it that way? Either way, it isn't a good sign. Cheri may have been right in what she had figured out. Lucky for us I got out of there as fast as I did, and that there were no other cars on the road so the people in them would hear the blast and see us barreling along making our getaway. I hope the explosion starts a fire and his whole damn house burns down.

Early the next morning I leave Cheri in our rented room and walk a couple of blocks to the convenience store to pick up some buttered rolls and coffee for breakfast and also a copy of the local paper. I take a quick look at the headlines but don't start to read the paper there. I don't want the clerk to see that I'm interested in anything special in the paper.

Back in the room I spread the newspaper out on the bed and read it out loud while Cheri is

opening the coffee containers and setting out the rolls on a small table in the corner. There was no fire at the house. According to the article in the paper, Michaelson's house was broken into the night before and the safe blown open with a plastic explosive that wasn't powerful enough to do any real damage in the bedroom or start a fire. It was loud enough for neighbors to hear the blast, and they called the police. Also, the security company said they had received an alarm from the house just a few moments before the sound of the blast, as close as they could calculate it. It looks like a real professional job, the paper says, especially the use of just the right amount of plastic explosive. The paper goes on to say that Mr. and Mrs. Michaelson were at an affair at the country club, where the police came to notify them of the break-in. The paper says the Michaelsons reported that some money kept in the safe is missing and also a ring worth a quarter-million dollars. It's after I get to this part in the story in the paper, and Cheri has finished setting up the coffee and rolls, that I start to read the next paragraph in the article, and I almost choke on the words.

According to the paper, Mrs. Michaelson has told the police

that she's seen a suspicious character driving by the house in an old car a couple of times in the past week. She describes this character as a young man with flaming red hair and wearing what looks like a loud and colorful Hawaiian shirt.

I stop reading and look at Cheri. Her eyes are wide, and there's a frightened look in them. We had figured—or rather Cheri had figured—that Michaelson would try to cheat us out of the second five hundred, but we had never expected anything like this.

I skim through the rest of the article in the paper with Cheri looking over my shoulder; then we go and sit down at the table in the corner. I pick up my coffee and take a swallow. It's still hot. I nibble at my roll. Cheri just sits there, staring into her coffee.

When we had gone over and over the job again and again the day before and Cheri had figured out that Michaelson might pull a doublecross on us, we had worked out a plan of action. It was a good plan, but it didn't cover this new development—the Michaelsons putting the finger on me. Now, every cop in town will be looking for a guy with bright red hair and maybe wearing a loud Hawaiian shirt. And it's a safe bet that our landlady, who lives

downstairs, will be on the phone to the cops the minute she reads the article in the paper.

We have to move fast. I look in my wallet. Not much money left, but enough to do what we have to do next. I put on my baseball cap, thanking my lucky stars that I'd worn it and my dark clothing when going to the convenience store. At least the clerk won't have something to call the cops about. We throw a few things in a couple of suitcases and manage to sneak out without our landlady seeing us. We get into the old Chevy and drive until I find a small motel at the edge of town. I sit in the car while Cheri checks in for us, and soon we're safe and snug—at least for the next few hours—in our motel room. We sit down and go over our options. There aren't many, but Cheri, with her quick mind, soon works out a plan. I add a few touches of my own to the plan, and when we're finished, we know what we're going to do.

I hold Cheri close and she kisses me and holds me and cries a little, and both of us know we might not be able to be this close again for a long time. I finally let go of her and leave the room. I've got some shopping to do and a couple of calls to make from an outside phone. And I don't have much time.

Later that afternoon I'm sitting in the back booth at Howie's, sipping at a bottle of beer and holding one of the manila envelopes that Michaelson gave me. I'm wearing my working outfit—baseball cap and dark clothing. Howie's behind the bar, arms folded, glaring at me through the dim lighting. We're alone in the place. Howie has a CLOSED sign on the door, and he's locked the door behind me.

I hear a car door slam shut. Howie comes out from behind the bar and looks out the front window, then unlocks the door. Michaelson comes in, and Howie locks the door and goes back behind the bar. Michaelson's wearing jeans and an open-necked blue sport shirt—no *el jefe* white suit and Panama hat this time. He's carrying what looks like the same attaché case he had before. He gives Howie a quick glance, slides into the booth opposite me, and slams the attaché case down on the table. His glare matches Howie's.

"What the hell you think you're doing?" he snaps at me.

I let him sweat while I drink some more beer. "You bring it?" I ask, looking at the attaché case. "Ten thousand, right?"

"I don't like being blackmailed," he says, his voice hard.

"And I don't like being set up," I tell him.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm here only because you gave Howie some crazy message."

"You know damn well what I'm talking about," I snap back at him. "You and your wife gave the cops and the newspaper a perfect description of me. What'd you think, I wouldn't tell them about you when they picked me up?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he says again.

"Maybe you figured it'd be your word against mine, right? Who'd believe a petty thief, right? They'd think I was just making up some cockamamie story about you hiring me to pull the job to give me some plea-bargain leverage, right? And you didn't have to worry about Howie admitting anything, either, that right? He'd deny I was ever in here with you."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he says for the third time.

I have to smile. He's speaking up in a clear voice and looking at my chest, and I know what's on his mind.

"I'm not wired," I say. "Want to check me out?"

He thinks for a long moment, then shakes his head and takes a deep breath. "We had to do it

that way," he says finally. "If my wife and I hadn't given some kind of logical-sounding description, the police and the insurance company might get too suspicious. I assumed you'd get out of town fast right after you collected the second five hundred from me. That way, the description would be a real one if the police checked around, but you'd be nowhere around for them to pick you up. I was going to suggest that you dye your hair and stop wearing that Hawaiian shirt." He gives me a thoughtful look. "I still suggest it."

"Thank you for sharing that with me," I say. "Let's see the ten big ones, huh? Small bills, too, like I told Howie."

He clamps his hand on the attaché case. "Not so fast, Arnold. You told Howie something about a fingerprint. My fingerprint?"

"Correct, Mr. Michaelson. Absolutely correct. Your little old thumbprint right there on the button I pushed on your remote box when I set off the blast. You lied to me about the timing. That blast went off a lot sooner than you told me. Maybe you were hoping I'd get caught right there, huh? But it didn't happen, right? Maybe that's why you and your wife had to give my description to the cops." I shrug. "Makes no difference now," I tell him.

He chuckles. "Nice try, Arnold. But I wiped that remote clean before I gave it to you, remember?"

"That you did, Mr. Michaelson. I remember that real good. And I remember, too, that you snapped the red guard shut before you wiped the box. Your thumbprint was on the button all along." I chuckle right back at him. "You think the cops won't check it out? You think maybe the cops won't have their experts go over the remote and what's left of the wiring and other stuff on your safe door and put two and two together and come up with the question of what was your fingerprint doing on the remote button?"

He looks startled for a moment, then his eyes light up and he gives me a big, wide grin, his teeth flashing white. "Nice try once again, Arnold. But you're forgetting that you pressed that same button while wearing gloves, very neatly eliminating my own fingerprint." He pulls the attaché case close to him and holds it tight. "I came with the money as you demanded because I wasn't sure what kind of fingerprint evidence you were talking about to Howie. Now I know. No fingerprint at all. Now you're not even going to get that second five hundred. I told you I don't like being blackmailed."

I don't even bother grinning

back at him. I open the manila envelope and slide out the shiny metal box with the closed red guard. The box catches some of the dim lighting and gleams there on the table. "You told me you didn't care what I did with the remote afterward," I say. "Cheri and me decided it would be a good idea to keep it—for protection." I take a ballpoint pen from my pocket and use the point of the pen to push the metal box from side to side. "You did this when you gave the envelopes to me," I tell him. "So you wouldn't have to touch them after you wiped them clean." Now I give him the grin I've been holding back all along. "I learned from you, Mr. Michaelson. I used the tip of my pen to press the button when I set off the blast. Then I closed the guard down. Your thumbprint is still there."

He makes a sudden grab for the box, but I'm too fast for him. I shove it back into the envelope with the pen and pull the envelope out of his reach.

"Give it to me," he says.

"The money first," I tell him.

He looks over at Howie. "There's two of us here."

"Howie's not the violent type," I say. "I told you we go back a long way. The only thing he makes a fist for is to hold on to his money."

He looks over at Howie again,

then back at me. "So it's me against you," he says and sits up straighter and sticks out his chest. "I think I can take you."

"Don't try it," I tell him.

He snorts. "You told me you never carry a gun."

"I do now," I lie.

He thinks about that for a long moment. Then, moving his hands slowly and carefully so I'll see he's not going to do anything sudden, he unlatches the attaché case and opens it. I can see stacks of banded bills inside, twenties and tens. "It's all there," he says.

"Show me," I tell him. "Just flick through the stacks."

He presses his lips together and picks up one stack of bills after the other and holds them so I can see them and flips them with his thumb. Even in the dim lighting, I can see there's no singles or cut pieces of newspaper in the stacks. I can't count as he flips them, but I'm satisfied. If it isn't exactly ten thousand, it's close enough.

"Okay," I say.

He closes the attaché case and pushes it a little toward me, keeping a grip on the handle. I shove the envelope closer to him. He lets go of the attaché case and grabs the envelope. I pull the case over to me. He stares at me. I let my right hand drop below the table, like I'm

reaching for something in my belt.

He nods his head slowly, carefully slides out of the booth, and walks slowly to the front door. I wait until I hear a car start up and then go to the front window, holding the attaché case in one hand and my beer in the other. The white Caddy is pulling away.

I turn around and walk over to the bar and put the bottle to my lips and finish the beer and clunk the bottle down on the bar. Howie isn't glaring at me any more.

"You helped set me up," I say.

Howie shrugs, but his eyes dart around. We're alone in the bar.

"What'd Michaelson do," I say, "ask you to get him someone not too professional but real easy to identify later? I was going to be the fall guy, right?"

Howie won't look me in the eye.

There's a lot boiling up inside me, but I hold it back. I don't tell him what I'd like to do to him. I don't tell him how Cheri and me talked it all over and made our decision. I don't tell him one of the calls I made from the phone outside the motel was to our lawyer. I don't tell him the ten thousand is my way of getting Michaelson to pay our legal fees and also provide money for our lawyer to make it right with the

supermarket and compensate them for what Cheri did so they'll drop the charges against her. I don't tell him that Cheri and me figured it's better for me to do some time while she waits for me and then make a clean start because we can't see spending the rest of our lives looking over our shoulders. Maybe it won't even have to be hard time or too long because our lawyer will be working out a deal with the D.A.

But most of all, what I don't tell him is that it turned out to be real easy for me to go to an electronics store and show them the remote and, just like Michaelson, buy the box and the red guard and the black button and then put it together in our

motel room. What Michaelson walked out with was an empty box that looked just like the real thing in Howie's cheap lighting in the bar. The real box with Michaelson's thumbprint on it and all the wiring and parts inside is with our lawyer, who's waiting for me in his office and will go with me while I turn myself in.

I don't tell Howie any of this. He'll find it all out later anyhow when the cops come for him after they nab Michaelson and his wife.

I just look at Howie and say, "See you around," and walk out of the bar and on my way to that clean start Cheri wants us to make.

In Hawaii, of course.

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BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



A strong-hearted chicana P.I. named Ronnie Ventana and the tales of her cases have earned author Gloria White nominations for three of the big crime fiction awards. Now there's **Sunset and Santiago** (Dell, \$5.50) with a super opener. Ronnie is keeping a silent vigil in the dead of night near the corner where her parents were killed in an auto accident twenty years ago when a body is rolled from a car. Is this just a coincidence? Or—as Ronnie suspects when she begins to search for the victim's identity—is there actually a secret about her parents' death, one that may at last come to light? White gives readers a smart, savvy, and very sympathetic protagonist as well as a fresh view of San Francisco.

Tami Hoag (*Night Sins* and *Guilty as Sin*) has written another big thriller with a lot of heat. **A Thin Dark Line** (Bantam, \$22.95) has Hoag's trademarks in spades: a clever and twisted killer, heart-pounding suspense, hardnosed police procedure, and soft-core sexiness. It was a Louisiana parish deputy, Annie Broussard, who found the body of a woman, a victim of an exceptionally brutal murder. Now, due to a ruling on a piece of the prosecution's evidence, Marcus Renard—the man the police believe to be the killer—is walking out of the parish courtroom a free man. But Annie can't let the case go, and her unauthorized investigation draws her into a deadly dance: with a Cajun cop who has a mighty reputation and a disconcerting aura of secrecy and with the accused killer, who begins stalking Annie exactly as he tried to "romance" the murdered woman. And these are merely the players who have shown their hands in this deadly game.

Martha Lawrence's first novel introducing psychic detective Elizabeth Chase also won her nominations for three of the mystery

genre's most prestigious awards. Now there's **The Cold Heart of Capricorn** (St. Martin's, \$21.95), the third in the series. With doctorates in psychology and parapsychology as well as her California P.I. license, Elizabeth is accustomed to working with police on tough cases. In this one, a series of brutal rapes, the violence seems to be escalating at an alarming pace; and the forensics team has yet to turn up any useful evidence. Elizabeth's psychic gifts are proving to be unhelpful: she's getting insights when it's too late, and a sense of deep connection to one of the victims. The police work is fascinating, and Elizabeth proves a worthy protagonist: smart, mature, funny, and sensible as well as "sensitive."

Darian North's hero in **Thief of Souls** (Dutton, \$22.95) is Dan Behr, a nice guy who's an overworked architectural drone in a New York City firm. He is blessed with a beautiful if unusual wife and a very young daughter—until the day he learns that his wife has joined a cult and does not intend to return. Ever. The story spans more than a year as Dan tries to rebuild his shattered world. Then, like Job, young Dan must face his next trial, and the next, and the next. The details about cults in America—their power, presence, and operations, and the methods used by those trying to rescue lost ones for grieving relatives—add extra chills. North has a very sympathetic character in Dan; no reader will be able to resist rooting for him as he fights for his wife, then for his daughter, and ultimately for his own soul.

Readers who like softboiled novels with male protagonists—those of Jeff Abbott, for instance, or William DeAndrea—should look for David Leitz's **Fly Fishing Can Be Fatal** (St. Martin's, \$5.99). Who could ask for a more perfect setting for the debut novel in the Max Addams series than a rebuilt Vermont lodge catering specifically to fly fishermen? Max is a genial host and a resourceful guy, a retired executive who now lives comfortably with a small staff and enjoys the company of a lover who is also the mayor of the tiny town nearby. But there's a different kind of fly in Max's ointment when he rents out the entire lodge for a preseason opening week to a notorious old Mafia don. Addams serves up a believable broth of action, suspense, and scenery to die for.

Parnell Hall's Stanley Hastings, the private eye of a thousand quips, takes on a client who looks like Ichabod Crane in **Scam** (Mysterious Press, \$22). Like that other gawky guy, Cranston Pritchert fears that he's being chased, set up as the dupe in some sort of plot. Pritchert is vying for top spot in his firm; perhaps one of

his opponents is behind the scam? At first Stanley's efforts all lead to Pritchert himself; it looks as if Stanley's nervous client has hired a private eye to finger *him*. Indeed not, Pritchert swears; this is just another confusing part of a scheme designed to make Pritchert take a fall. Just as Stanley is swooning under the implications he begins to find himself knee-deep in dead men. Worse, the glint in his arch-enemy's eye (Sergeant Belcher) tells the P.I. that he's the prime suspect in the murders. You'll have to read to the very end to find the one true scam in the book, and it's well worth the journey. Parnell Hall is, quite simply, a lot of fun.

It's not a new book but it is in a new edition, and readers who haven't yet discovered the pleasures of Barbara Michaels (a.k.a. Elizabeth Peters) should pick up **Be Buried in the Rain** (Harper, \$5.99) in its new jacket. The heroine, Julie Newcomb, is a level-headed medical student who's been manipulated by her mother into spending a summer at Maidenwood at the side of her dying grandmother. Problem is, as a child Julie spent four of the worst years of her life on this decaying Virginia plantation. Her older male cousin was a bully, while her grandmother proved herself a true termagant. But Julie finds that some things have changed. She is now a very independent adult, her cousin is a handsome young man running for public office, and her shrewish, matriarchal grandmother is bedridden after her last stroke. A long-buried skeleton, a former lover eager to excavate on the property, and flashes of repressed memories add to the mix, making this a thoroughly compelling and entertaining suspense novel, sheer delight for readers of Mary Higgins Clark and her ilk.

Stephen Greenleaf's **Past Tense** (Scribner, \$22) delivers his longtime private eye protagonist, John Marshall Tanner, a killing emotional blow, and it remains to be seen whether he will ever recover from it. Charley Sleet is an older cop, a fairly recent widower, and a man known throughout the San Francisco legal system as a solid, standup guy. He is also Marsh's oldest and closest friend. When Marsh hears that Charley has blasted away in court at a defendant who's just been found not guilty, he reels. But Charley is in jail, taken away after he lowered his gun in the courtroom, and isn't talking to anyone, not even the high-powered attorney Marsh recruits. Greenleaf's exploration of Marsh, his buddies, and especially his old friend is a visceral experience not for the fainthearted. As always Greenleaf's lean prose and near-existential dialogue is the scalpel that cleanly exposes the guts and heart of his tale.

THE STORY THAT WON

The February Mysterious by George Watson of We-Honorable mentions go to Massachusetts; Nils V. Bockchussetts; Francis C. Biddy of Fraser of Canton, Michigan; Texas; Adam Case of Camp Floars of Woodbridge, Virginia; Robert V. Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Robert H. Wynn of Young's Point, Ontario, Canada; and Bill Berkheimer of Camp Hill, Pennsylvania.



Photograph contest was won taskiwin, Alberta, Canada. David A. Rooney of Natick, mann of Centerville, Massa-Rochester, New York; Ray Betsy Bucy of New Deal, Hill, Pennsylvania; John W. Floars of Woodbridge, Virginia; Robert V. Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Robert H. Wynn of Young's Point, Ontario, Canada; and Bill Berkheimer of Camp Hill, Pennsylvania.

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

THE ALIEN by George Watson

"Turn around, Jack," I said, "the monster is escaping."

Perhaps he didn't hear me because he just kept on climbing the stairs and the creature was already at the lab door, heading outside.

"It's killed Dr. Ballchucker in the genetics lab!"

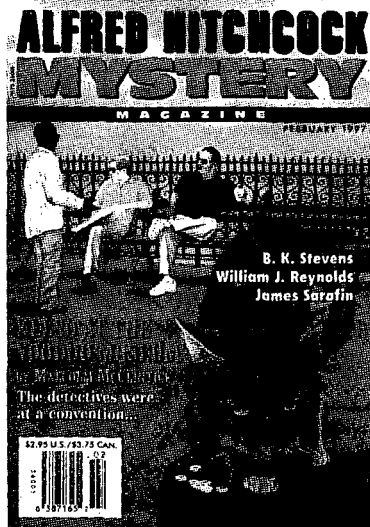
It had strange appendages growing from its arms and was able to choke the old boy. And what a monstrosity it was. Its head was oval, not smooth and round. It had these stringy things on top and holes in its face. Strange sounds emanated from the bottom hole, which seemed full of white cubes of some kind. Its covering was soft, and those stringy things seemed to be all over it.

"Where did it come from?" Jack called.

"Well, we had a science crew visiting a little planet a short while ago and they found it sleeping, so they brought it home to study. Everything was fine until the professor took this glass container from its insides labeled 'Vino'; then it went crazy, choked the doc, grabbed it back, poured the contents into that bottom hole, and dashed off. Last thing it uttered sounded like, 'Buy your own lunch,' whatever that means."

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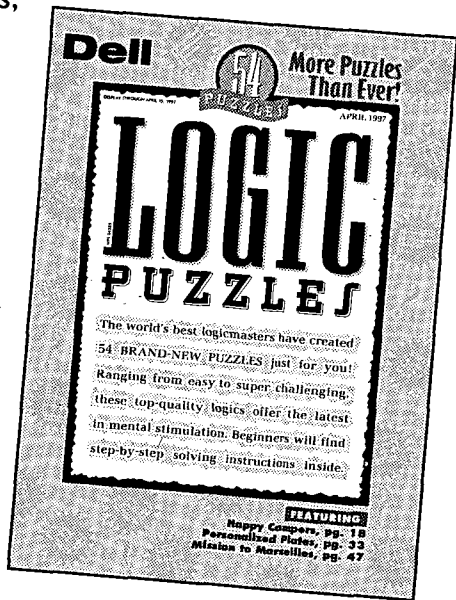
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